

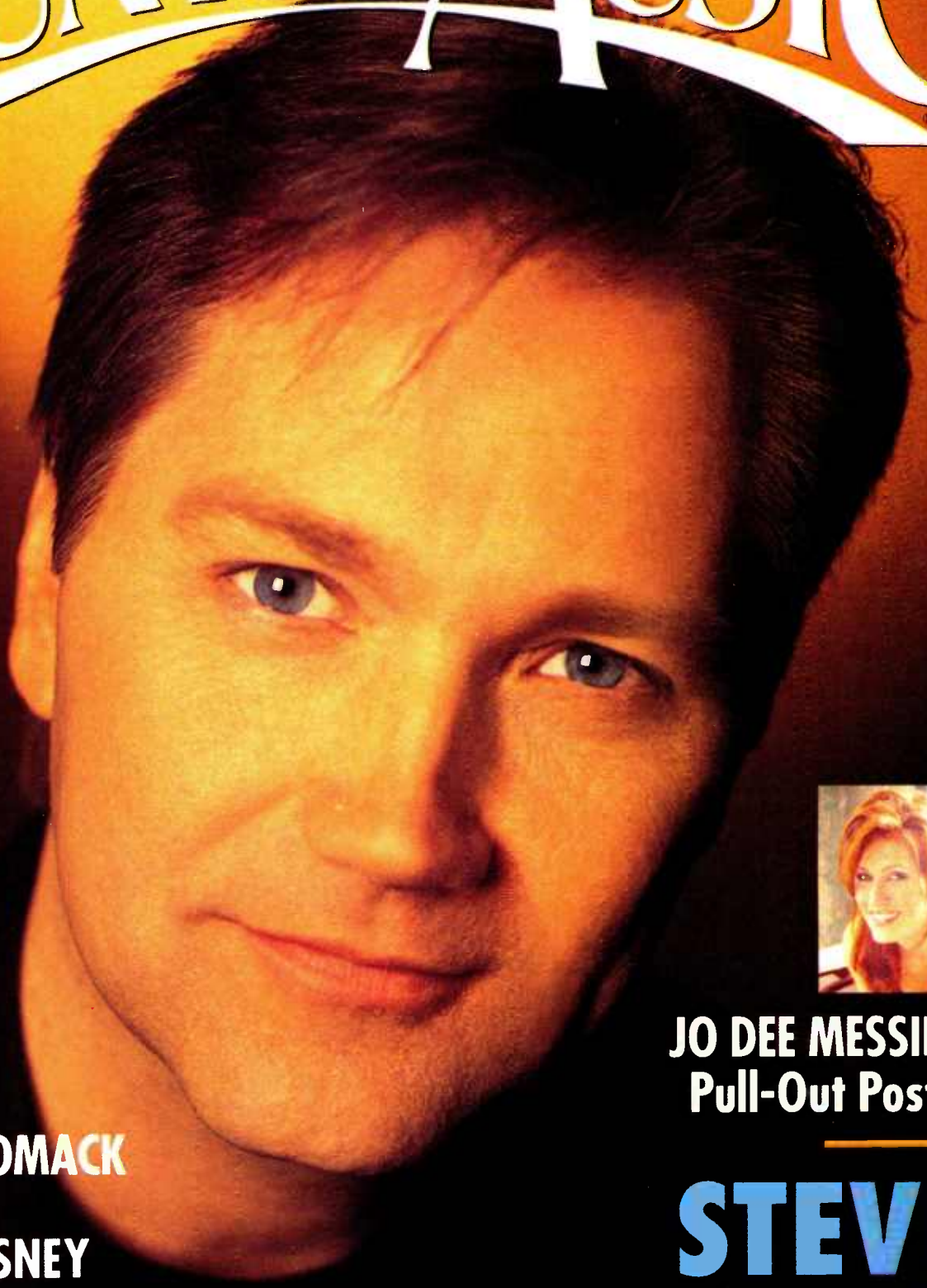
Ralph Stanley • T. Graham Brown • Cheryl Wheeler

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1999

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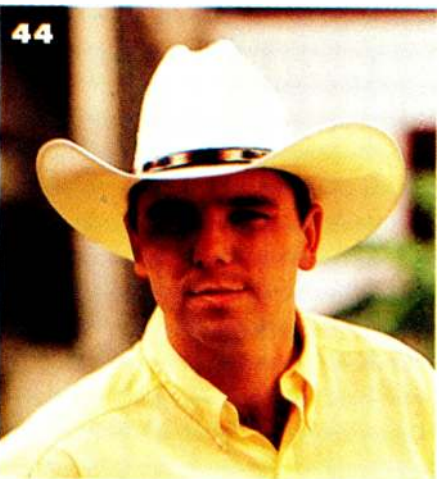
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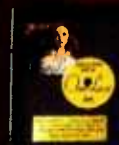
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People

LITTLE JIMMY DICKENS' 50TH

Joining an elite group of legends—Roy Acuff, Bill Monroe, Minnie Pearl and Grandpa Jones—Little Jimmy Dickens became the fifth person to claim a 50-year membership with the Grand Ole Opry. The 4-foot, 11-inch giant of country music was joined by all his Opry friends in celebration. His fishing buddy, Bobby Bare, showed up, as did pals Waylon Jennings, Carl Smith and Jimmy Dean, who came from his home in northern Virginia for the occasion. Vince Gill called in his congratulations via satellite from Las Vegas where he was performing. George Jones also appeared via satellite. Both men congratulated their pal and told him they loved him. Dickens was described by his peers as the consummate entertainer. The singer/songwriter/entertainer was given his "Tater" nickname by the late Hank Williams, obviously referring to his hit, "Take an Old Cold Tater and Wait." The late Dottie West always called him "Sweet Tater." Little Jimmy Dickens, the oldest of 13 children from Bolt, West Virginia, was among the first country stars to wear Nudie suits with fancy rhinestones. "So they could see me," he explained. During the ceremonies, the Gibson Guitar Company surprised Dickens with a brand-new J-200 Gibson. Elated, he exclaimed, "I'll put my Gibson I've played since 1956 into retirement and play the new one." Traveling an average of 100,000 miles annually for 48 years—approximately 4,800,000 miles all told—he quit the road last year. Not to worry, you can still see Little Jimmy Dickens every Friday and Saturday night at the Grand Ole Opry. Like Vince Gill says, "Little Jimmy Dickens is what entertainment is all about."

Following the televised portion of the Opry, friends, family and fans gathered for the party when, unannounced, in walked Garth Brooks through the caterers' entrance. Garth had an invitation to the party, but let the date slip his mind. He, wife Sandy, their three daughters and some friends were sitting around a camp fire with the radio tuned to the Opry when he heard the celebration start on



Friends and family came to celebrate Little Jimmy Dickens' 50th Anniversary on the Grand Ole Opry. After the show, Jimmy and wife Mona cut the cake. Among the guests were Jeanne Pruett, Charlie Collins and Garth Brooks. Jimmy is only the fifth Opry member to celebrate 50 years on the show.



the air. Garth's memory was jolted! "I have to go," he said. And he went alone, dressed in his work clothes, to show respect for one of his heroes.

OLD DOGS

Remember a few issues back I did a lengthy item on the Old Dogs album set for release last year? Didn't happen. This time it is happening. Those Old Dogs are barking up your TV a-hawking their music via 1-877-OLD-DOGS. Waylon

Jennings, Bobby Bare, Jerry Reed and Mel Tillis recorded belly laugh stuff that I promise will amuse. The two-CD set contains 21 original songs written by Shel Silverstein, whose pen has given us treasures like "A Boy Named Sue" by Johnny Cash, "Marie Laveau" by Bobby Bare and "One's On the Way" by Loretta Lynn...all three ticklers of the funny bone. This is music for those young enough to remember how it was, but not old enough to commiserate about being over—but not under—the hill.

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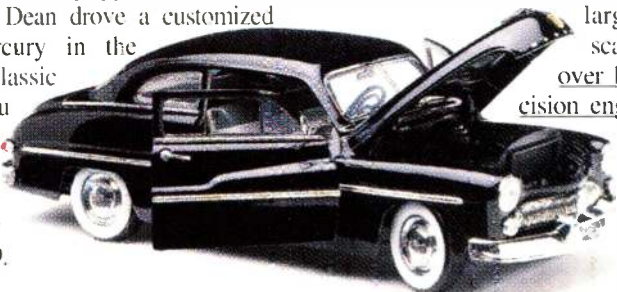
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People

A FAMILY OUTING



Country music's own Reba McEntire, husband Narvel Blackstock and son Shelby take in the Music City premiere of *Prince of Egypt*.

RALPH'S THIRD BOOK

Following his best seller, *Memories*, and the follow-up, *More Memories*, country music's good friend **Ralph Emery** brings us now a third book. Titled *The View From Nashville*, this book is a series of short stories mingled with vignettes about big stars like the marvelous **Reba McEntire**, the late hilarious **Roger Miller**, the ever wonderful **Vince Gill**, the fabulous late **Carl Perkins** and the late great **Conway Twitty**. Current superstars like **Alan Jackson**, **Brooks & Dunn** and **Travis Tritt** did not escape Ralph's pen. Nor did his longtime pal, **Barbara Mandrell**, or perennial favorite, **Brenda Lee**. The book is dedicated to the late **Owen Bradley** and **Chet Atkins**, who attended the release party at BMI. Chet, who is fragile from a bout with cancer but has not lost his incredible sense of humor, thanked Ralph for the dedication. Tales of the late rabble-rouser **Faron Young** and **Johnny Horton's** legendary "message from the grave" alone are worth the price of the book. Ralph has been there, done that, and lived to write about it. I'm enjoying this book as much as I did his others, and I highly recommend it to you. Among the partygoers were hubbys **Narvel Blackstock** with Reba, **Ken Dudney** with **Mandrell** and **Ronnie Shacklett** with **Brenda**. Others in attendance included

Vince, **Ray Stevens**, **Tommy Cash**, **Dee Henry** (Mrs. **Conway Twitty**), **The Hager Twins**, **Bud Wendell** and an entire room filled with friends, fans and well-wishers.

DOLLARS ADD UP

John Conlee never recorded a bad song. One of my favorites that was a hit for John is "Busted," from the songwriting pen of **Harlan Howard**. Recently John recalled someone laying a dollar at his feet one night as he performed the song. Since that time, John sets a pail onstage, and when he performs "Busted," fans put a dollar bill in the pail. So far John Conlee has collected \$129,000 one-dollar bills and donated the money to Feed the Children.

DEL McCOURY FLASH

I've just learned the marvelous **Del McCoury Band** will be hitting the highway with new representation. Monterey Artists will book Del and his band, which features his handsome and talented sons, **Ronnie** on mandolin and **Robby** on banjo. The Del McCoury Band was named Entertainer of the Year at the International Bluegrass Music Association Awards held in Louisville. **Ronnie McCoury** was named Mandolin Player of the Year, and fiddle player **Jason Carter** was named Fiddle Player of the Year by the organization. The group will tour with **Steve Earle** the early part of 1999. Europe is included on their itinerary.

BEATLE MUSIC

Music Row songwriter **Gary Burr** is on the road with **Beatle Ringo Starr**.

KENNY ROGERS STILL THE GAMBLER

Kenny Rogers joined show organizer **Collin Raye** at the Ryman for his Make a Difference weekend that concluded with a concert. All the concert money went to Childhelp USA, which battles child abuse. During the fund-raiser, **Kenny** told **Collin** he'd give him a hundred dollars for every hit of his he could name. Being a longtime barroom singer, **Collin** knows every hit by every star in every genre of music and has sung most of them. **Collin** rattled off 17 hits before **Kenny** could sing, "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em" from "The Gambler." **Kenny** is still the gambler, but this time it went for a great cause. Others singing for the kids were **Kathy Mattea**, **Gary Chapman**, **Kevin Sharp**, and **Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's Jeff Hanna** and his wife, **Matraca Berg**.

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People

AT CMA'S 40TH CELEBRATION

With 200 of Nashville's biggest stars in attendance, the highlight of the taping of the *Country Music Association's 40th Anniversary Celebration: Country Music's Brightest Homecoming* was **Martina McBride's** performance of "A Broken Wing." Another unforgettable moment that took my breath away was the powerful instrumental performance of "Lonesome Ruben" by **Randy Scruggs**, ably assisted by dad, **Earl Scruggs**, who wrote the tune. Others in the band assembled for the occasion were **Chet Atkins**, **Steve Wariner**, **Duane Eddy**, **Vince Gill**, **Anita Cochran**, **Leon Russell** and **Don Was**. Now is that a hot band or what? I asked Randy if this was the first time Don Was had ever played a bluegrass song. Randy didn't know, but assured me that Was does not categorize music and just loves to play. Backstage, when a photo was snapped of Was with Earl and **Louise Scruggs**, Don said it was the biggest thrill of his life. Earl's roadies for the night were granddaughters **Melissa** and **Jennifer Scruggs**. Steve Wariner said they were the prettiest roadies he'd ever seen. Fans gave huge welcomes to **K.T. Oslin**, **Reba McEntire**, **Alabama**, **Kris Kristofferson** and **Barbara Mandrell**. After the show and past the midnight hour, Kristofferson and a crew from *60 Minutes* showed up at The Bluebird Cafe, where Kris borrowed the stage

for a few minutes and sang "Me and Bobby McGee." Still wearing his tux from the show, Kris split from the club, climbed in the back of a pickup truck with his former band member, the Alabama leaning man, funky **Donnie Fritts**, and a bevy of famed and near-famed and roared out into the Music City night. Nobody said, but I wondered if *60 Minutes* host and Kris' former brother-in-law, **Ed Bradley**, was in town to film this segment. When Kris was married to **Rita Coolidge**, Bradley was married to her sister, **Priscilla**.

GOOD-HEARTED SAM

Sammy Kershaw was performing at a rodeo in Ohio. After his show, he was watching 14-year-old barrel rider **Ashley Foos**. She was midway through her act riding her horse, Champ, when the horse collapsed and died. Ashley was distraught. Back home at his 88-acre ranch, Sammy couldn't get his mind off the heartbroken teen. He kept looking at his nine horses, especially his favorite horse, Bebe, the one he'd bought to ride himself. He'd been on the road so much there hadn't been time for Sam to ride Bebe. He called Ashley and invited her and her parents to come to Nashville. I know I don't have to tell you that my man Sam, my good-hearted man Sam, gave the teen his favorite horse, Bebe. I love these country performers. They make me proud every day of my life.



Here's the band that gave me chills at the CMA's 40th Anniversary Celebration. In front, **Earl Scruggs**, **Chet Atkins** and **Anita Cochran**. Standing, **Steve Wariner**, **Randy Scruggs**, **Duane Eddy**, **Don Was**, **Leon Russell**, **Vince Gill** and **Chad Cromwell**. Band leader **Randy** called this his "Crown of Jewels Band," same as his Reprise album, *Crown of Jewels*.

DANNI DEBUTS



Decca Records' Danni Leigh making her debut on the Grand Ole Opry recently. It's always an honor.

TONY (WOW) BROWN AT HOME

He's a preacher's kid that played piano for gospel singers, **Elvis** and **Emmylou Harris**. He's produced hits on **Vince Gill**, **George Strait**, **Reba McEntire**, **Trisha Yearwood**, **Wynonna** and dozens more. He is President of MCA Records. His mama lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he was born. My mama lives north of Greensboro. I call him **Tony (wow) Brown** 'cause he's so handsome. Women all across the country who read my column write him letters addressed to Tony (wow), and write me letters agreeing with me on his good looks. MCA's CEO **Bruce Hinton** and Tony hosted a "better late than never" welcoming party for MCA publicity persons **Angee Jenkins Smith** and **Stacey Studebaker** at Tony's digs. Tony invited me. I went with this magazine's **George Fletcher**. George and I walked in with **Bruce Hinton**, who is not only quite handsome, but is the best-dressed man on Music Row. My favorite part of Tony (wow)'s house has to be the wall of the formal dining room (that you can actually see from outside), which has two large black-and-white photographs of Tony and his two beautiful children, **Brandi** and **Brennan**. With all the trappings of show biz, my friend Tony Brown never lost sight of his kids.

People

GREAT MOMENTS OF MUSIC

I attended the R.O.P.E. banquet ceremonies at the Convention Center during CMA Week, where entertainment was by the inimitable **Gene Watson**. The man virtually took my breath away. A week of music, and I have to say, Gene Watson out-sang the entire slate of current stars. I am happy to report that R.O.P.E. (Reunion of Professional Entertainers) named Gene Watson Entertainer of the Year. All you young people, I plead with you, if you truly love country music, look until you find a record by Watson that includes "Farewell Party." To me, it's like music education to hear the man sing that song straight from his heart. Only one other star can come close to singing "Farewell Party" as good as Gene, and his name is **Alan Jackson**. Let me tell you, that Jackson boy knows about singing from the heart, too. After Alan brought me to my knees backstage at Fan Fair during the Arista Show in 1997 when he

sang "Farewell Party," I talked with him about recording the song. Alan felt Gene did a perfect job when he recorded it and thought maybe he should let it alone, and besides, he didn't know how Gene would feel about him recording the song. Gene told me he'd love it if Alan recorded the song. I want it recorded for my children's children to hear perfection in country music. 'Nuff said?

TRAVIS TRITT'S NEWEST ROLE

Wearing a teal blue, three-quarter length brocade coat over jeans and white shirt, **Travis Tritt** looked tough enough to leap off a horse and whip **Schwarzenegger** when he strolled into the Hard Rock Cafe that night. My driver/date for the evening, the ever-wonderful **Bob Oermann**, and I were early arrivals, so we had ringside seats with the equally wonderful songwriter, **John Jarrad**. Once shy, Travis was howdying, hugging and smiling at all his guests, guiding his beautiful wife, **Theresa**, as he went milling through the crowd

holding daughter **Tyler Reese** in his arms. That baby is so perfect. She favors her mama, but she looks like Travis, too. Never cried once. This daddy/hubby role fits Travis. I mean, he always looked good as a hillbilly star and as an actor in films and in his videos. But he never looked as good as he does in the role of daddy/hubby. What were we celebrating? The release of Tritt's newest music on Warner titled *No More Looking Over My Shoulder*, which has to be today's theme for the former Georgia wild man. The label also honored Travis for sales of 17 million albums.

OPRY AT THE RYMAN FOR A NIGHT

The Ryman Auditorium was home of the Grand Ole Opry for 31 years. Opry stalwarts along with some of today's current crop of stars performed on the Ryman Reunion Celebration. **Steve Wariner**, **Marty Stuart**, **Travis Tritt**, **Lorrie Morgan**, **Vince Gill**, **Patty Loveless** and **Joe Diffie** hung out with two of the finest entertainers of them all, **Little Jimmy Dickens** and **Roy Clark**. Some 34 acts performed. All proceeds from the show will benefit the Performers Benefit Fund.

KINKY'S BLAST FROM THE PAST

Kinky Friedman's newest detective novel, titled *Blast From the Past*, reaches back to the 70's, when his country music career starts to flounder. His crime investigation is launched at the suggestion of Larry Sloman, a.k.a. Ratso. Cowboy hat wearing Abby Hoffman hangs out in Kinky's apartment in Greenwich village. Shots fly and cocaine is plentiful. Kinky meets *Daily News* reporter Mike McGovern in the book and later meets Steve Rambam. Both characters become regulars in Kinky's books, as does Ratso. Bigtime laughing, beginning to end. Kinky and **The Texas Jewboys** reunited recently in Nashville, and I was privy to attend a recording session by the legendary group that included **Billy Swan** and **Donnie Fritts**. The soon to be released CD, titled *Pearls In the Snow*, will be marketed via direct response on **Don Imus' Imus In the Morning** show, which airs on radio as well as cable TV channel MSNBC.

WE PARTY FOR EVERYTHING

Mercury newcomer **Jenny Simpson**, BMI, and her label had a party to honor the songwriters who wrote the songs for her new record. Now that is a first, even for Music Row. Yep, we are always looking for things to party about, aren't we.

REMEMBERING BUDDY HOLLY



The **Crickets** and **Waylon Jennings** together again for a British TV taping honoring their old boss, **Buddy Holly**. They spent a day reminiscing both in the studio and out. Below, **Waylon** and **Crickets J.I. Allison**, **Joe B. Mauldin** and **Sonny Curtis**.



PHOTOS: MORELLO/GHERGIA

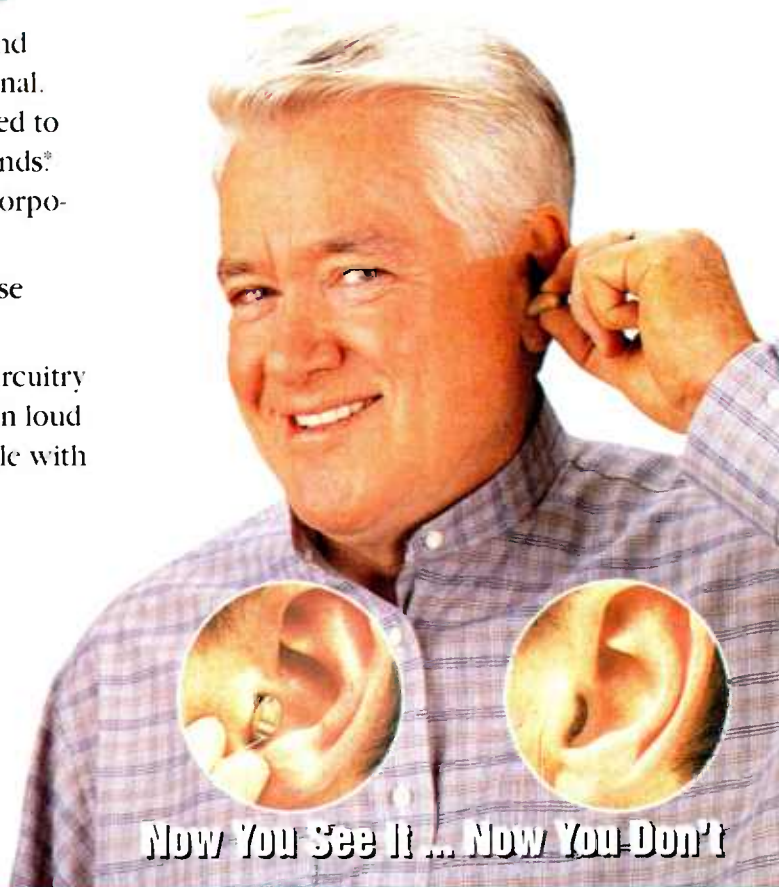
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People

ASCAP AWARDS

At the ASCAP Awards, exec **Connie Bradley**'s gold satin gown was outstanding, as was the show (as usual). I sat with her stepson, **Clay Bradley**, and his lovely wife. Clay works with his dad, **Jerry Bradley**, at Acuff-Rose and is one of the nicest and most unspoiled young "upcoming execs" on the Row of Music. Clay is very close to his grandmother, the wonderful **Katherine Bradley**, wife of the late **Owen Bradley**. Katherine, in her 70's, enjoys baby-sitting Clay's two youngsters. Speaking of the Bradleys, I recently saw **Jessica Lange** being interviewed on TV when she was asked the question: "What was your most enjoyable movie?" Lange's reply, "*Sweet Dreams*. Working with the great **Owen Bradley** in the studio—who produced both **Patsy Cline** and **Loretta Lynn**—and meeting all the other Nashville people at the Opry and everywhere was the best it could be. The nicest people in the world are down there." I presume you know that *Sweet Dreams* was the story of Patsy Cline's life.

Guy Clark's Lifetime Achievement Award by ASCAP was the most deserved honor of the week. It was fitting that his pals **Rodney Crowell**, **Vince Gill** and **Lyle Lovett** honor him with his songs. Guy's "L.A. Freeway" has as much information as most books. Not a wasted word or verb in the entire song. Other winners were EMI Music Publishing's **Gary Overton**, who accepted the award for Publisher of the Year, and superstar **Alan Jackson**, who was named ASCAP Songwriter of the Year.

MORE AWARDS

I enjoyed sitting with **The Oak Ridge Boys'** **Duane Allen** and his beautiful wife, the ever wonderful **Norah Lee Allen**, at the BMI Awards. Norah Lee sings with the **Carol Lee Singers** on the Opry every weekend and does add a lot of class to the show. The Allens left early, so I decided to do a room schmooze, and when I heard somebody call my name, I answered. It was plumb perfect **Vince Gill** looking every inch a hunk with his gorgeous date, daughter **Jenny Gill**, who wore a white silk gown with spaghetti straps and teal trim. The empty chair on the other side of Vince had been occupied by a departed **LeAnn Rimes**. Congratulations to our friend, **Stephony Smith**, who took home the Robert J. Burton Award for the Most Performed BMI song of the year for "It's Your Love" by **Tim McGraw** and **Faith Hill**. Plus, Stephony, **Mark Alan Springer** and **Ronnie Dunn** were named Songwriters of the Year, and EMI was Publisher of the Year.



After the awards, come the photos. At the BMI do, above, front: **Tim McGraw**, songwriter **Stephony Smith** and **Faith Hill**; rear: BMI's **Roger Sovine**, songwriter **Mark Alan Springer**, EMI's **Marty Bandier** and **Gary Overton**, BMI's **Frances Preston**, **Ronnie Dunn**, BMI's **Del Bryant** and EMI's **Bob Flax**. At ASCAP, right, **Lyle Lovett**, **Rodney Crowell**, **Susanna Clark**, **Guy Clark** and **Vince Gill**. A surprised Guy was presented the ASCAP Lifetime Achievement Award. Below, **Gary Overton** of EMI, ASCAP's **Connie Bradley**, and **Alan** and **Denise Jackson** smile for the cameras following the ASCAP ceremony.



SHANIA WALKS

Shania Twain was seen walking her dog, Tim, around Green Hills Mall. Her husband, **Mutt**, was nowhere to be seen. Isn't that just like a modern woman: a dog named Tim and a husband named Mutt. Times sure are a-changing. Later Shania, her band and road crew, and **Kevin Lane** from Mercury Records showed up at the

trendy **Graham Central Station** on Second Avenue, where they danced the night away to the sounds of old disco tunes. Is that how Shania keeps her figure?

CONDOLENCES

Condolences to **Rodney Crowell** on the death of his mother. We also add our condolences to **BlackHawk's Dave Robbins** upon the passing of his father.

People

MICHAEL MARTIN ON WESTFEST

Michael Martin Murphey has an album coming out on the newly formed WestFest label, titled *Cowboy Songs Four*. He and Lyle Lovett collaborated on a song for the project. I hear it's called "Farther Down the Line." Congrats, Michael.

WHY CAN'T WE DO IT NOW?

With the end of the millennium just around the corner, it is high time we remember a man who had a song that remained Number One for 21 consecutive weeks: "In the Jailhouse Now." I'm talking about Webb Pierce. Webb also had 12 other Number One songs, including "Slowly," which stayed at the Number One spot for 17 weeks. "Love, Love, Love" hung at Number One for 13 weeks. "I Don't Care" and "There Stands the Glass" were Number One for 12 weeks each, and "More and More" occupied Number One for ten weeks. What's more, Webb had 41 additional Top Ten songs. Isn't it time to elect Webb Pierce into the Country Music Hall of Fame? What about the golden country voice of the great Carl Smith, who had five Number One hits and 26 other Top Tens? Every country girl I knew had a high school crush on Carl Smith. How we screamed when he sang "Let Old Mother Nature Have Her Way." We cannot let him fall through the cracks. He must be elected. Also the great Faron Young, whose Number One smash, "Hello Walls," and a half dozen other hits crossed over pop. "Alone With You" by Faron stayed Number One for 13 weeks. And Dolly Parton and Waylon Jennings have track records as songwriters and singers that deserve immediate recognition. (It wouldn't surprise me if those two end up in the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame as well.) Why can't we do it now?

JOHN MICHAEL MONTGOMERY WINS USE OF DAD'S IMAGE

Obviously, some strained relationships led to this being settled in court.... Singer John Michael Montgomery used his late dad's image and tombstone in his music video titled "I Miss You a Little." He performed the song as a tribute to his father, Harold Montgomery, who was also a singer. The elder Montgomery died of cancer in 1994, though he lived to see his son, John Michael, achieve the superstardom that had evaded him. In a lawsuit, John Michael's stepmother charged him, his record label and the video co-producer, saying they did not have written consent

to use Harold Montgomery's likeness, name or voice in a music video. The judge upheld John Michael's right to use his father's image in a video.

WILLIE NEWS

Willie Nelson's show opener has been "Whiskey River" for ages. Writer of the song, Johnny Bush, is recuperating in San Antonio following triple bypass surgery. I hear Willie's wife, Annie, has moved from Austin to Maui with their boys.

TRACE AND E.G.

The wonderful Trace Adkins has a new record producer, the wonderful Emory Gordy Jr. If you don't know Emory Gordy Jr.'s fabulous work, especially on wife Patty Loveless, you must have been left in orbit by John Glenn his first time up.

SECOND CHART TOPPER

Mark Wills' second chart topper, "Don't Laugh at Me," is just a great song. Mark brought along new addition Mally, his firstborn, to his second Number One celebration, held at ASCAP. He also brought wife Kelly.

JUNE AND HER EX'S

June Carter Cash has designs to record solo with a label she calls "Small Hairy Dog Records." I hear she asked Marty Stuart, Rodney Crowell and Nick Lowe, her three famous ex-sons-in-law, to join her in song. This is not the first time June has made this "ex-threat."

I DO SOON

Country music cutie Bryan White says Erika Page is the woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with. Erika stars in the New York soap, *One Life to Live*. No wedding date has been announced, but it will be in Nashville, says Bryan. Sorry, girls.

JUDD JUICE

Crown Prince Albert of Monaco and actress Ashley Judd unveiled the new Grace de Monaco parfum by Faberge during the Princess Grace Awards in New York City. Expensive perfume is spelled parfum. Once I had some perfume spelled parfum. It smelled so loud, my sons and I could not stand it. Besides, it offended our cat.

HONORING TRISHA



Worldwide Gold and platinum success for Trisha Yearwood's *Songbook: A Collection of Hits* was celebrated at the home of MCA-Nashville chief Bruce Hinton. Pal and duet partner Garth Brooks joined the do, presenting Trisha with a gift of his own: a brand new Chevy truck. Brooks quipped that he wanted to thank Trisha for "bringing something to my shows that people aren't used to seeing—talent." Left to right: Brooks, MCA's Tony Brown and Bruce Hinton, Yearwood and CMA Executive Director Ed Benson.

People

LENDING A HAND



Steve Wariner, Vince Gill and labelmate Bryan White joined Lila McCann in the studio to sing backup vocals on "You're Gone" for McCann's upcoming album on Asylum. It's her second for the label. Wariner and White wrote the song. Pretty lucky Lila, I say, surrounded by all those boys.

Linnie, who tried to bite my neck when I used it. Linnie would also try to bite my neck when I would use Ben Gay. God rest her soul.

ACUFF-ROSE ALIVE AND BACK

I for one am happy that Opryland Music has quietly returned to its founding name, Acuff-Rose Publishing. Keeping the names of the legendary founders, **Roy Acuff** and **Fred Rose**, brings a lot of historical significance to the table. Plus Fred's son, **Wesley Rose**, continued as a mainstay in the business.

THE HENHOUSE THREE

It was no trouble for those Platinum laying **Dixie Chicks** to get a Number One single with "There's Your Trouble." The celebration was at BMI for the smiling threesome.

BLUESMAN HONORED

Another recent BMI party honored the song "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" for six million broadcast performances. Bluesman **Steve Cropper**, a Nashville resident, penned the song for **Otis Redding**. When the math was explained, if that song were played consecutively over and over: it would play for 37 years to add up to six million spins.

ALAN GOES ANOTHER COUNTRY

The long-legged wonder, Mr. **Alan Jackson**, released his powerhouse song, "I'll Go On Loving You," in Portuguese and Spanish. Muchas gracias. Didja pay attention to the song's lyrics? Alan sang about green eyes, the color of wife **Denise's** eyes. Songwriter **Kieran Kane** originally wrote "brown eyes."

WELL SLUNG

"I'm well slung," said cast-wearing **Terri Clark**, whose arm was pulled out of the socket by an over-zealous fan at a fair in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Never one to whine, Terri blames her accident after accident after accident on being clumsy. Terri's new management is Fitzgerald-Hartley, which also handles **Vince Gill**, **Patty Loveless**, **Clint Black** and a slate of others.

SO LONG TO DOLLY'S MENTOR

Flags on the city buildings in Knoxville flew at half mast, ordered by the mayor, to honor **Cas Walker**. The 96-year-old former entrepreneur was a politician and owned a chain of grocery stores. Walker advertised his businesses on local TV using the talent of many of today's country music stars, including **Dolly Parton**. Dolly performed on the *Cas Walker Show* from

the time she was ten years old. Upon his passing, Dolly said, "Today is a sad day for me, but I'm sure God is glad to have him."

RANDY & LIB EPISODE

Randy Travis and his wife **Elizabeth (Lib) Hatcher-Travis** were riding in a limo in Hollywood when the driver fell over the wheel. The limo hit a curb, and Randy bolted over the seat and managed to stop the vehicle. The driver had died of a heart attack!

MOVIE STAR REBA

Reba McEntire and Starstruck's CBS-TV Movie of the Week, *Forever Love*, received excellent ratings. In its wake, WalMart sold a bevy of Reba product as well, including the six-song sampler, *Forever Reba*, which yours truly had a hand in.

PRESIDENT

Congratulations to good guy **Steve Buchanan**, who has been named President of the Grand Ole Opry. Steve, a long-time supporter of country music, including all the styles that make up the form, managed the Ryman Auditorium. He's a hard worker and well-respected by all who know him. The Opry is in good hands with Buchanan. A visionary with common sense, foresight and love of music, Steve will search out new horizons for Opry members, the old and new.

FAREWELL TO T. TOMMY CUTRER

The last time I saw **T. Tommy** was the night after the R.O.P.E. banquet when I bolted out the front door of the Convention Center. Tommy's wife **Vicky** was behind the wheel of their car, backed up to the front door. T. Tommy was getting in. "She won't let me drive," he said. "Good for her." I laughed and waved goodnight. Then he was gone. At the memorial, **Connie Smith** sang "How Great Thou Art" and **Billy Walker** sang T. Tommy's signature song, "Peace in the Valley." Great men of country music like radio's **Charlie Douglas** and **Tom Perryman**, **Eddy Arnold**, former Opry manager **Dee Kirkpatrick**, **Keith Bilbrey**, **Jimmy C. Newman**, **John Hartford**, **Porter Wagoner** and a bevy of others followed T. Tommy to his final resting place. T. Tommy Cutrer, he put the "C" in **Jimmy C. Newman's** name 'cause it stands for Cajun. He gave **George Jones** the nickname "Possum," and he was the first person to play a **Johnny Cash** record on radio. Sounds like Hall of Fame material to me. Sympathy to Vicky and his children.

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MARK McGWIRE		HEIGHT: 6'7" WEIGHT: 225					
		BORN: 10-4-69, POMONA, CA					
MAJOR LEAGUE RECORD							
YEAR	TEAM	GAMES	HR	R	RB	OBP	SLG
1989	STL	116	52	110	110	.410	.710
1990	STL	157	57	137	137	.410	.710
1991	STL	159	59	143	143	.410	.710
1992	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1993	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1994	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1995	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1996	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1997	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1998	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
1999	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
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2016	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
2017	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
2018	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
2019	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
2020	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
2021	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710
2022	STL	154	49	141	141	.410	.710



The player's career statistics — including 1998 — are highlighted on the back.

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GENE AUTRY

Into the Sunset

by Russ Barnard

When I was about three or four, my favorite Aunt Annie took me as a visitor to her church, in a small country town in the heart of the Oklahoma wheatlands. The custom was for members to stand up and introduce their guests. I stood on the pew next to Annie as she said, "This is my nephew from Texas, Russell Barnard." I protested loudly, "My name's not Russell Barnard...my name's Gene Autry!" I was wearing my Official Gene Autry Two Gun and Holster Set. That's the way it was for my generation, in a time and place where even four-year-olds with buddies and dogs walked to the Saturday double feature matinee cowboy movie, without grownups, paid their dime and sat in the front row. The dog got in free. If Roy Rogers was later called King of the Cowboys, Gene Autry was God.

There were legions of others who felt the same way, including Johnny Cash, Waylon and Willie and lots more of our favorites. We kids didn't know what our parents knew, that years before, Autry had already reached a pinnacle as one of the country's most popular radio and recording stars.

Gene had authentic country roots. Born on a Texas ranch in 1907, he grew up on his father's Oklahoma cattle ranch where the family had moved. He was a musician from early years, learning from church singing, radio and records. Jimmie Rodgers heavily influenced his early singing and guitar style. According to legend, while Gene was working as a railroad telegrapher, he met Will Rogers who, after hearing Autry sing, encouraged him to seek a professional career. Gene took off for New York to make the rounds of recording companies. A Victor executive, Nat Shilbret, advised Gene to get some experience singing on radio to polish his skill.

He landed a job at KVOO in Tulsa, and a year later, Gene signed with the legendary producer Art Satherley at the American Recording Company, which later became Columbia Records. In 1929, his first recordings covered Jimmie Rodgers' standards like "Waiting for a Train" and "In the Jailhouse Now" so closely that many listeners thought it was

Rodgers. The breakthrough to stardom came in 1931 with Autry's hit, "That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," co-written with his railroad buddy, Jimmie Long. That landed him on the very popular WLS *Barn Dance*, and not long after, Gene had his own show on WLS. In 1934, Satherley landed Autry a singing cowboy part in the Ker Maynard "B" western, *In Old Santa Fe*. Audiences went wild, so Gene was quickly signed to star in the wonderfully weird cowboy-science-fiction serial, *The Phantom Empire*. Fortunately, this led to Autry's first starring role in *Tumbling Tumbleweeds*, the first of his 93 movies. The following years brought his classic recordings like "Mexicali Rose," "It Makes No Difference Now," "You Are My Sunshine" and the song that became his trademark and, in 1939, the theme of his CBS radio show, *Melody Ranch*: "Back in the Saddle Again."

In the late 1940's, Autry went beyond cowboy music to record three incredible hits that became instant children's classics which will be played forever: "Here Comes Santa Claus," "Rudolph The

Red-Nosed Reindeer" and "Peter Cottontail." And, in 1950, he rode into television with his sidekick Pat Buttrum and, of course, the ever-perfect Champion, "The Wonder Horse."

Autry's huge success in radio, records, movies and TV brought in lots of money, which he invested wisely, building a vast business of broadcasting and hotel properties. A lifetime baseball fan, he also owned the California Angels.

But to the little boys and big boys like Russell, Johnny, Waylon, Willie and many of you, he was a hero...in today's terms, a role model. Gene reined in every sort of vile, cowardly villain with fists, guns and lasso...never doing them serious injury or letting blood. And when his country was in peril, he put his \$1,000,000-a-year career aside and served as an Army Air Corps pilot for \$100 a month. He was always polite to the ladies while rescuing them from the most perilous situations. Then, when he had returned them safely to the bosom of family and friends, he smiled and sang them a song...but never kissed them. In short, he lived by *Gene Autry's Cowboy Code*. ■



Gene reined in every sort of villain with fists, guns and lasso.

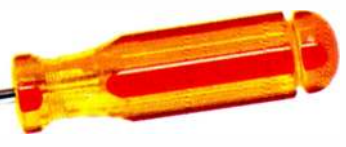
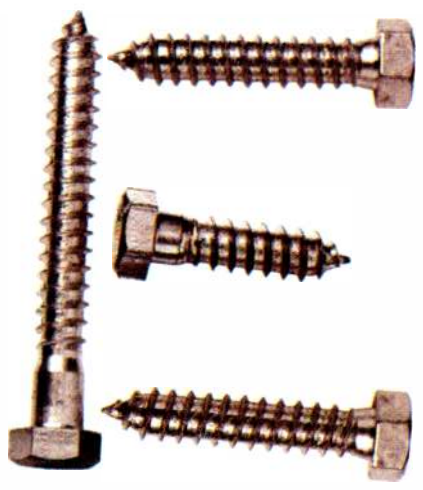
GENE AUTRY'S COWBOY CODE

1. The Cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.
2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.
3. He must always tell the truth.
4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.
5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.
6. He must help people in distress.
7. He must be a good worker.
8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action and personal habits.
9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws.
10. The Cowboy is a patriot.



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Record Reviews

Travis Tritt

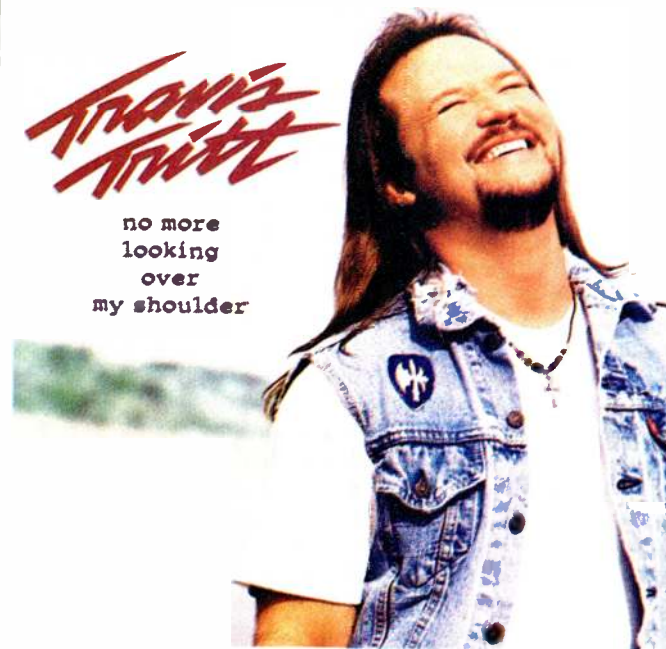
No More Looking Over My Shoulder
Warner Bros. 9 47097

In the past few years, Travis Tritt (perhaps mistakenly) has given some fans the impression he was trying to out-junior Hank Williams Jr. Remember Hank Williams Jr.? He sort of plummeted gracefully from multi-platinum stardom to near-marginality as more and more of his music turned stale and redundant and seemed devoted to perpetuating an image of self-righteous, super-macho redneck buffoonery.

Maybe it started with Tritt's very public spat with Billy Ray Cyrus a few years ago. Or maybe it was the accumulated baggage of macho song fodder like "Country Club," "Ten Feet Tall and Bullet Proof" and "Here's a Quarter (Call Somebody Who Cares)." Or maybe it was Tritt's blistering, hairy-chested Southern rock stage persona that gradually began to work against him. Whatever the cause, Tritt, for a while there, seemed in danger of fading into the same sort of sunset of irrelevancy as Hank Jr.

Maybe it's fatherhood that's since turned the corner for him. (Tritt and his wife recently had their first child.) Or maybe it's the fact that this gifted, inspired and hard-working musician has diligently soldiered on throughout all the image problems and controversies. (*No More Looking Over My Shoulder* is his eighth album since 1990.)

Whatever the reason, the page seems to have turned. *No More Looking Over My Shoulder* is a milestone album where the most memorable songs are devoted to mature topics like forgiveness, commitment, ten-



derness and devotion rather than more devil-may-care themes of Southern-style rugged individualism and face-to-the-wind freedom at all costs.

The powerful title tune (co-written by Michael Peterson and Craig Wiseman) may sound like just another of Tritt's blustering, hard-rocking, good-time anthems—at least on first hearing. But listen more closely, and you realize the freedom Tritt sings about here comes from rising above the pettiness of one's own insecurities and learning to forgive.

"If I Lost You" (the first single from *No More Looking Over My Shoulder*) and other moving original ballads like "For You," "The Road to You" and "I'm All the Man" celebrate the trust, vulnerability and letting go that are required for lasting adult love. This is clearly music from a man who is deeply in love with his child, his wife and his life.

There's only one song on the album that even approaches the free-wheeling, short-fused

anti-heroic posturing we've come to expect from Tritt. It's called "Girls Like That," and even it has a surprisingly warm and fuzzy lining to it.

Even the most rocked-up tunes on this album are serious in intent. Tritt does a superb rendition of the Bruce Springsteen classic, "Tougher Than the Rest," imbuing it with all the jaded humanity, cautious optimism and honesty of Springsteen's original version. On "Start the Car" (written by Jude Cole) he evokes such an intense mood of falling-through-the-cracks, blue-collar desperation that it's easy to imagine that this song was also ripped from the annals of classic Springsteen or Bob Seeger.

Ultimately it's songs like these that give *No More Looking Over My Shoulder* the feeling of a major turning point for Tritt—one that seems destined to open some new doors (emotional and otherwise) not only for the singer, but for his devoted listeners as well.

—BOB ALLEN

Shaver

Victory
New West NW 6003

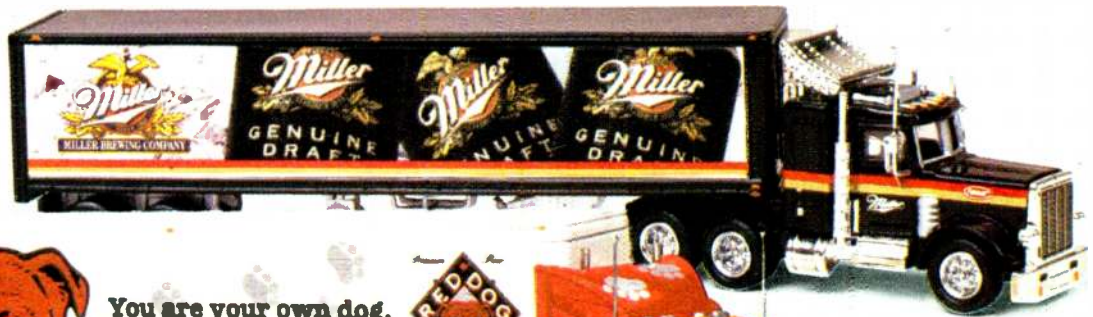
The last person I ever expected to see playing the best friend to Robert Duvall's fatally flawed pastor in *The Apostle* was Billy Joe Shaver. But there he was, spruced up in his first movie role, portraying a saved soul forever grateful to the murdering Southern clergyman who'd saved him from the abyss. And he did a damn fine job to boot. Shaver's journey has taken some interesting twists since *Tramp on Your Street* restored him to prominence, two decades after Waylon first brought his primitive, witty songs to the world's attention on *Honky Tonk Heroes*.

Shaver has never hidden his Christianity in his music. Even the rougher songs possess an underlying spirituality, sometimes subtle, sometimes not. All of that was undoubtedly on his mind as he recently helped ex-wife Brenda battle cancer. What emerged from that struggle was this deeply personal album, mixing Shaver standards with little known, unrecorded gospel originals with nary a hint of Christian-rock or Nashville gospel. He and son Eddy set aside the rip-roaring electric guitars and rhythm section of past albums for no-frills acoustic music, recording the entire album in just six days.

The result is a dozen songs whose impact couldn't be stronger if they'd used a wall of amplifiers, with a level of intimacy so great the listener can almost feel they're eavesdropping on a very private session. This begins with "Son of Calvary," the opening track that Shaver sings unaccompa-

Made for the long haul.

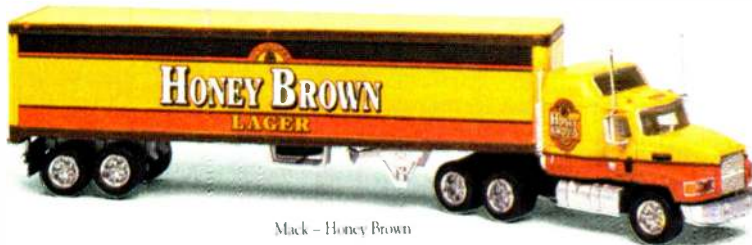
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Mack - Honey Brown



Kenworth COE - Moosehead



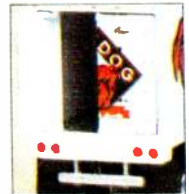
Peterbilt - Pabst Blue Ribbon



Kenworth - Corona

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Record Reviews

nied, his performance as barren and unsettling as a Deep South field holler. Even with the Shaver wit, this mood permeates the entire record, peaking on the minor-keyed, deeply personal hymn, "My Mother's Name Is Victory," which conjures the same feel as Eddy fires off Dobro licks behind him. The title is no allegory. It really was his mother's first name.

Only Shaver could make a song like "You Can't Beat Jesus Christ" believable, punctuating this earthy, rollicking statement of faith with passionate, snarling, quintessentially Shaver lines like "excuse my slanguage," snarling lines like "I have been saved by Jesus Christ." There's no question about it. He *means* every word, as he does in the uniquely honest Christmas tune, "Presents From the Past." His acoustic performances of "Old Five and Dimers" and "Cowboy Who Started the Fight" emphasize both their spirituality as well as their honesty, equaled on "Live Forever," the supremely eloquent "I'm in Love," "Christian Soldier" and "When the Fallen Angels Fly." The final song, "The Bow and the Arrow," an ode to future generations, ends the album with an almost haunting serenity.

It's doubtful that many have heard this record. The label is new and tiny. No matter. Pushing 60, Shaver has made some incredibly raucous, exciting and moving records in recent years. This one stands apart from even those. It won't win awards, but it should. —RICH KIENZLE

Los Super Seven

Los Super Seven
RCA 67689

In 1997 and again in 1998, Las Manitas, a Mexican restaurant in Austin, Texas, held one of the most talked-about events at the annual South by Southwest Music Conference. Country star Rick Trevino, country-rocker Joe Ely,



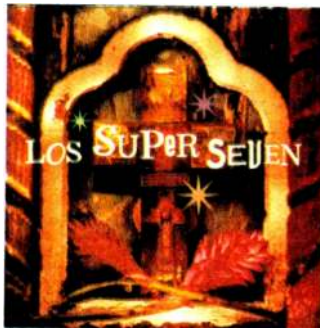
"rockabilly filly" Rosie Flores, Dead Reckoner Tammy Rogers, accordion whiz Joel Guzman and Doug Sahm and Augie Meyers of The Texas Tornados got together to see just how much American country music and Mexican country music had in common. All that separated them was a language and an easily crossed river. No one knew this better than Trevino, who grew up in the Mexican-American community of East Austin before becoming a Nashville star, and Ely, who worked in his father's shop which catered to Mexican workers in Lubbock before he became an alternative-country hero.

The experiment worked. It was obvious Mexican country music had filtered into American country music through Texas and that the Americans had had a similar impact on the Mexicans. Borders are drawn on the ground, but music travels freely through the air.

Trevino's manager, Dan Goodman, was so impressed with the results that he organized a recording session based on the same concept. This time, Trevino and Ely were joined by Freddy Fender and Flaco Jimenez of The Texas Tornados, David Hidalgo and Cesar Rosas of Los Lobos, and Tejano star Ruben Ramos to become the group dubbed "Los Super Seven." That became the title of the album, which also featured guest appearances from such Las Manitas veterans as Sahm, Guzman and the mariachi group, Campanas de America.

Except for Ely's version of Woody Guthrie's "Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Depor-

tee)" and two new numbers from Los Lobos, all the tracks are older Mexican songs sung in Spanish. Nonetheless, it's impossible to miss the country-music underpinnings of the project. When a mariachi violin saws away behind Hidalgo on "La Sirena," the effect is not so different from the Appalachian fiddle behind Roy Acuff on so many songs. And when Jimenez draws out phrases into long, sustained lines on his accordion, it's not so different from the role of the pedal steel guitar in Nashville.



When Freddy Fender sings two ancient songs from his Mexican childhood, his vocals convey the same soulful struggle to preserve some dignity in the face of personal disaster that they did on his eight Top 10 country hits. Los Lobos saxophonist Steve Berlin produced *Los Super Seven*, and he gives his bandmates Hidalgo and Rosas several sparkling showcases. Best of all is "Rio de Tanampa," Hidalgo's original, bilingual song with a haunting sense of lost love and lost youth.

It's no surprise that Fender, Ely, Jimenez and Los Lobos shine in this context; they're all well-established giants of American music. The real surprise of *Los Super Seven* is Trevino, whom many have dismissed as just another lightweight, baby hat act. Trevino's father is a Tejano musician, but it wasn't until the Las Manitas shows that the son recognized the full power of his father's music and how closely linked it is to American country music.

That realization has given a new depth and power to the

younger Trevino's singing. When he sings the lead on "Mi Ranchito" and "El Ausente," or joins Hidalgo and Sahm on "Rio de Tanampa," there's a new maturity, a new restraint, a new depth of emotion in Trevino's vocals. This may well be the turning point in a career that suddenly looks much brighter. —GEOFFREY HIMES

Connie Smith

Connie Smith
Warner Bros. 9 47033

Now and then an album comes out that feels like a shot in the arm for what ails you—or, in this case, what ails country music. So it is with Connie Smith's self-titled new album, which is her first in a very long time.

Connie Smith is not exactly a household name—though she arguably should be. Though she had nearly 50 country chart records between 1964 and 1985, her biggest and most memorable hits—like "Once a Day," "Then and Only Then," "The Hurtin's All Over" and "Cincinnati, Ohio"—came in the mid-1960's. In recent years, she's hardly been heard from on country radio at all—as has been the case with most artists over age 40.

Yet Smith's influence reaches further than her somewhat sporadic chart history might suggest. It gives you some notion of her vocal power that both George Jones and Dolly Parton have named her as one of their favorite singers.

And now, when country music's mainstream seems to have been handed over in perpetuity to pretty but fluffy detangled country-pop warblers like Trisha Yearwood and Faith Hill, here comes Connie Smith with a fine new hard country album that runs beautifully against the prevailing musical grain.

Credit for Smith's re-emergence goes in great part to Marty Stuart, who not only co-produced Smith's new album (along with Justin Neibank)

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and co-wrote eight of these ten fine songs with her, but also fell in love and married Smith somewhere along the way. In many ways, the spirited, heartfelt songs on *Connie Smith* sound like a sincere celebration of Smith's and Stuart's new-found marital and musical alliance.

From the very first twin fiddle wind-up that kicks off the opening cut, "How Long" (which Smith and Stuart co-wrote with the great Harlan Howard), all the way through to the last haunting note of the Celtic-flavored "A Tale From Tahrarrie" (another Smith/Stuart composition), the tracks on *Connie Smith* crackle with the free-spirited, unadorned vitality of those vintage years in the 60's when Smith and celebrated contemporaries like Loretta Lynn, Skeeter Davis and Jean Shepard were in their musical prime.



You can hear this vital, free-wheeling honky-tonk power in the jaunty back beat of a honky-tonk lament like "You Can't Take Back a Teardrop" (co-written by Chris Waters and Tom Shapiro) and in the fiddle and steel-driven despair of "Love's Not Everything" (Smith-Stuart). This same hard country spirit is also front and center in the romantic celebration of "Just Let Me Know" (Smith-Stuart), the redemptive optimism of "Your Light" (Smith-Stuart-Allen Shamblin) and the rollicking abandon of "When It Comes to You" (Smith-Stuart), which closes with some great yodeling from Smith. (Now, let me just ask you: When was the last time you heard Trisha or Faith yodel?)

Too often the appeal of

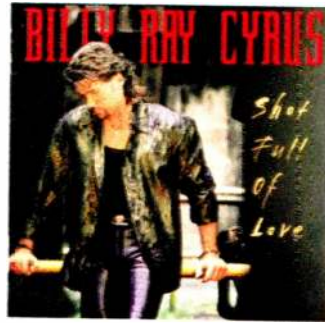
"comeback" albums from veterans from Smith's generation lies more in their nostalgia value than their actual musical currency. But not so this time. Connie Smith is not only back—she's back with a powerful, good-natured musical vengeance. —BOB ALLEN

Billy Ray Cyrus *Shot Full of Love* Mercury 314-558 347

Billy Ray Cyrus—now there's a controversial name. People tend to love or hate him, based primarily on his dumb but monstrously successful debut, "Achy Breaky Heart," and the poor quality of nearly every single he released thereafter. He wrote many of the worst tunes on his albums along with Don Von Tress. They may have meant something to his core fans, but they were really poorly crafted songs at best. Radio forgot about him long ago, but he still sells millions of albums.

The first thing you might notice with *Shot Full of Love* is that the songs are good. Cyrus is on his third production team, this time with commercially proven label head Keith Stegall in the lead. Stegall used top-notch Nashville studio players instead of Cyrus' Sly Dog band, then auditioned publishers for radio-ready songs. Billy Ray ducked off the road and out of sight for the first six months of 1998 to work on this project, and I think they've done the trick.

The studio players copped the play-anything-that-fits sensibility of Sly Dog's enthusiastic live performance, and so the catalog of commercial clichés pop up less often than they could have. Stegall also kept the softer vocal style Billy Ray shifted to with *Trail of Tears*. Cyrus uses his voice much more effectively now. Among other things, he stays on pitch and has a wide emotional range with which to interpret a song. Originally, he sounded angry all the time.



Songs are the central point here. Billy Ray has a great time with the call-and-response chorus on the mid-tempo shuffle, "Rock This Planet." The electric and steel guitars on the ballad, "Give My Heart to You," reminded me of country-leaning sounds of Jerry Garcia from the early 1970's. That is certainly different and truly inspired for a heart-pulling and detailed storyline by tried and true hitwriters Bob DiPiero and Walt Aldridge. A backwoods barroom Kentucky rocker at heart, Billy Ray sings it great, too.

Basically, I thought Billy Ray was like a guy backing into something he was totally unprepared for when his career took off. He was shot from a cannon by "Achy Breaky Heart," was worked half to death by handlers who viewed him as a "get it while we can" flash in the pan. His consistently stolid and profoundly generous connection to his audience, though, outlasted all those people.

Offstage, there was always a shy-but-determined, quiet, decent human being. Perhaps with the death of his manager, the late Jack McFadden, Cyrus has finally had time to rethink life. As he says, "I adjusted my music, my attitude and my appearance....I let go of the past. I just felt it was time to come back down to earth." I wish he'd done this years ago, but he has done it now. He's found the right team and attitude to make a terrific record, and I hope radio will give his many fans exposure to this good new music. Billy Ray Cyrus deserves a second listen. —BOB MILLARD

Jenny Simpson *Jenny Simpson* Mercury 314-538-038

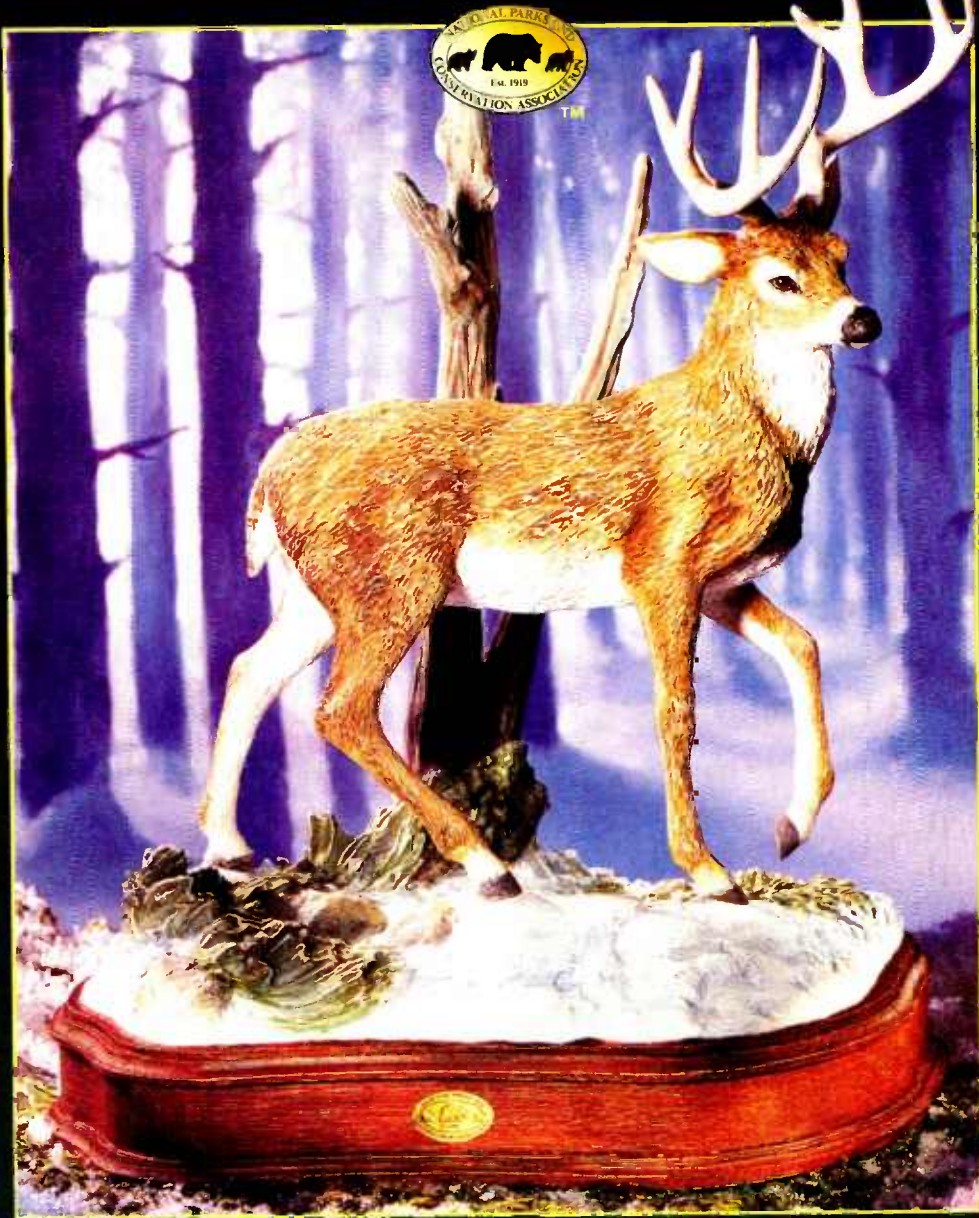
The diva disease has hit Nashville hard. Every female singer on Music Row suddenly thinks she has to be the next Celine Dion or Mariah Carey. They all torture their tonsils with enough volume and vibrato to shake loose the ceiling tiles—as if that had anything to do with country singing.

So it's a pleasure to hear *Jenny Simpson*, the unusual 90's debut album where the female vocalist shows some restraint. The 25-year-old has the light hair, straight teeth and perfect nose of every other female newcomer in Nashville (and of half of every evening-news team in the nation)—and a lovely alto voice to boot. Simpson, though, doesn't feel the need to push that voice to the brink of hysteria to prove what a great singer she is. Young as she is, she's wise enough to know that a conversational tone can make a song more personal, more penetrating than the loudest roof-rattling.

Of course, it helps that the album was co-produced by Garth Fundis, who got his start with the great guru of understatement, Don Williams. Fundis makes sure the arrangements are as low-key as the vocals—the rhythm section keeps it simple; the fiddle, steel and mandolin add a few tasteful fills—giving Simpson plenty of room to tell her stories. And her delivery is so unforced, so natural, that she creates the illusion that she's sitting across the Formica table from you in a diner booth, pouring out her soul.

The first single is "Ticket Out of Kansas," the familiar tale of an 18-year-old kid leaving a small town on a Greyhound bus headed for the big city. What makes this version of the story different is the way Tia Sillers' songwriting and Simpson's interpretation

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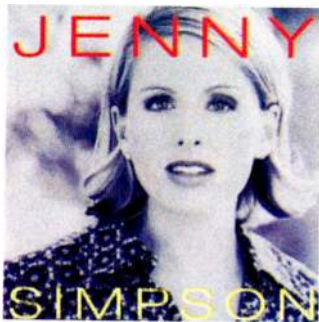
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balance the hope for success and the fear of failure so carefully that you can't tell how the story will end. When Simpson sings "I'm so scared I can't stand it, I know so many dreams are bound with this ticket out of Kansas," you can hear her doubt and ambition fighting it out in a voice so informal, so authentic it could be your next-door neighbor's.

The irony, of course, is that Simpson isn't from a Midwestern small town but from Nashville itself. Perhaps that's why she sounds so relaxed—she's not going anywhere. Unfortunately, her hometown connections didn't help when it came to finding songs for her debut project. Like so many major-label releases from Music Row, this one is bogged down by half-a-dozen songs that deserve to be forgotten—as they surely will be. Two of the weakest are the ones Simpson co-wrote with co-producer Ray Methvin.



But when Simpson gets the right song, she's utterly convincing. On the hypnotic, slow-motion chorus of Kieran Kane's "Foolish as That May Be," she sings "It's crazy to feel the way I do" with a helpless sadness, as if she knows just how foolish and doomed her love really is. On her duet with Michael Peterson, "Grow Young With You," she transforms a wish for eternal youthful romance into a bittersweet acknowledgement that such a wish is impossible.

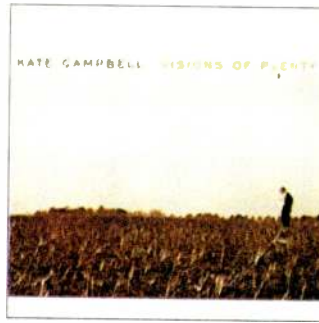
Best of all is "One Word," a heartbreaking ballad by Don Schlitz and Angela Kaset. The lyrics describe in detail the awkward moment when a man declares his romantic desires

to a female friend only to find she doesn't reciprocate those feelings. It's a song that could easily descend into sappy melodrama, but Simpson delivers it with perfect understatement. As a result, both characters retain their dignity—he was just being honest and so was she—even if their insides are twisting into knots. Simpson keeps her dignity as well, which is quite an accomplishment in this era of the diva. —GEOFFREY HIMES

Kate Campbell *Visions of Plenty* Compass Records 7-4251

For those who don't yet know Kate Campbell, she's a marvelously acute storyteller in the Southern literary sense. She even merits, in this writer's opinion, comparison to the great William Faulkner—with a light sense of humor.

Now, in her most carefully crafted record to date, Campbell shows us visions of the poor and working people of this part of the country as no other contemporary singer/songwriter is doing. In the title tune, a woman in dirt-poor Mississippi muses about the flashy neon dreams that come to the area with big-time casino gambling. Mixing dreams of someday getting enough money together "to buy a little piece of ground to call my own" and the flash of billboards promising easy riches, the singer spins the wheel every weekend, inevitably losing. It's a true story many times over for the region, I'm sure, yet Campbell's losers don't whine or see themselves as victims. And just about the time Campbell's edgy melody makes you think "I'd love to hear Emmylou Harris singing this," you begin to realize she is! Emmylou adds piercing, quavering signature harmonies on this and the deceptively sweet-sounding "Crazy in Alabama," a brave and evocative recollection of a tense summer at the beginning



of the Civil Rights era.

Campbell is a daughter of the lower South, and an unblinking observer of the things that move the heart and trouble the waters of the mind. While you think immediately of Neil Young upon first hearing the stinging vocals and electric guitars of "Jesus and Tomatoes," Campbell's lyric declaring her tomato garden a non-profit ministry because homegrown are about as close to heaven as a living Southerner gets is nine parts Guy Clark. Recalling hundreds of hand-painted religious warnings of imminent rapture and judgment along the roadsides, Campbell posts her front yard with one announcing "Jesus and Tomatoes Coming Soon." And who, raised in any small town or country setting, can hear "Funeral Food" without remembering many a table groaning under the weight of covered dishes the neighbors brought when your grandmother died?

Musically, Campbell is partial to Tony Joe White's funky Mississippi uptempos, Emmylou Harris-style ballads, horn sections and pounding gospel piano. She's unhindered by country radio's myopic vision and tin ears. Her music is full of life, pictures, emotions of depth and complexity. With this CD she exceeds her previous efforts—*Moonpie Dreams* and *Songs From the Levee*—in production sophistication, if not song quality, which is certainly not a criticism. You might hear her on a college station, or the folk show on your local public radio station—she has been featured on National Public Radio a couple of times. Or you might

just have to take my word for it. Kate Campbell didn't miss much growing up in the Deep South, and she is equaled in the brilliance of her musical retellings by perhaps only a handful of folkish, independent label singer/songwriters such as Dave Olney, Robert Earl Keen and Nanci Griffith. Brothers and sisters, that there is mighty high cotton.

—BOB MILLARD

Aaron Tippin *What This Country Needs* Lyric Street 65003

One look at Aaron Tippin's 16-inch biceps, and you know this is one good ol' boy you don't want to mess with. The former factory worker from South Carolina is the real deal, a hard-knuckled working-class hero. And he has carefully nurtured that image with such Top 10 blue-collar anthems as "You've Got to Stand for Something" and "Working Man's Ph.D."

If Tippin hadn't firmly established that image, his recent single, "For You I Will," wouldn't work as well as it does. When he sings, "It's not my style to dance away the night or go for a walk beneath the full moonlight," you believe he's the kind of macho guy who's uncomfortable with such mushy stuff. You can almost see him staring downward where his cowboy boots paw at the ground as he mumbles, "Aw, shucks, hon, I don't really want to." As a result, when he finally gives in and tells her, "But, girl, for you I will," you realize what a genuine sacrifice he's making and how much he really loves her.

It had been three years since Tippin had had a hit, and he left RCA for Disney's new country label, Lyric Street, during the dry spell. "For You I Will" put him back on the charts, and it leads the way for his new album, *What This Country Needs*. Over those same three years, Tippin got

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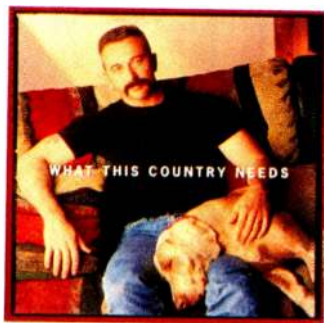
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married and had a new baby son, and the new experience of domestic bliss colors the songs he co-wrote and picked out for this album. It's a tricky balancing act, for he has to maintain his salt-of-the-earth, tough-guy persona even as he acknowledges his soft, romantic underbelly.

For the most part, he pulls it off. He kicks off the disc with "What This Country Needs," which seems as if it's going to be a Haggardesque manifesto about what's wrong with America. Instead it takes a comic twist as Tippin's gruff baritone growls, "What this country needs is a little more steel guitar, and put a little sawin' fiddle right in the middle." The steel and fiddle are there in the mix, but so are the rock 'n' roll drums and guitar. Well, that's what country is in the 90's, and Tippin belts the song out with a gusto that reaffirms his roadhouse image. That side of his character is further bolstered when he swaggers his way through the Al Anderson-Dean Dillon honky-tonk party anthem, "Don't Stop (We're Just Gettin' Started)."

So when he does confess his tender feelings for his woman, they have more credibility because they're coming from a rock, not a marshmallow. On "Back When I Knew Everything," you can tell where he's coming from when he confesses to his woman that a "hard head and no regrets is what I thought made the man, but now life's hard knocks is all I've got." The special challenges of making love work in a blue-collar home are hinted at in lines such as "What makes me get up every mornin' when I can't find the will?... I do it for her" and "This paycheck that I bring home sure ain't no pot of gold....but....we've got more than enough."

Only on the final two songs does Tippin get embarrassingly mushy. But the first nine songs include some of his finest work. Who else could take a declaration of romantic faithfulness such as "I Didn't Come



This Far (Just to Walk Away)" or "Nothing Compares to Loving You" and turn it into a piano-rattling, guitar-buzzing, swaggering boast? Anyone can sound romantic on a slow, lush song, but very few can do it on an uptempo rocker. Tippin can.

—GEOFFREY HIMES

Joni Harms *Concrete Dreams* Warner Western 47119

This is more like it. No third-rate karaoke singer landing a major-label deal, no market-researched, pre-packaged Trisha knockoff or Shania clone blaring out 1980's Sheena Easton clichés. Harms, an authentic Oregon cowgirl who still lives on the family ranch, is the real thing. Her voice is snappy, recalling the early Reba. She writes (though all her songs seem to have more experienced collaborators), and even her record company publicity isn't shy about pointing out the parallels between her and George Strait.

Harms is no newcomer. Ten years ago, she had a deal with Jimmy Bowen that resulted in singles on Universal and the Capitol album, *Hometown Girl*, which received only modest notice. It's understandable why that was so. In 1989, New Traditionalism was at the end of its run, and things were about to change. Clearly, Harms was too rooted to worry much about it, and was content to bide her time until the climate was right.

It very well may be right now, for this disarmingly simple

album reintroduces Harms in a way that makes everything about her that might have seemed mundane a decade ago sound and feel positively right. The songs are simple, but fit her flawlessly, and she performs them with a transparent sincerity refreshing in light of everything else going on. Vocally, she's unafraid to throw in a bit of nasality.



Her female outlaw story-song, "Belle Starr," is first-rate storytelling and the perfect opener. "Old-Fashioned Girl," despite a rather gimmicky mono-to-stereo opening (creating a bit of that "old-timey" sound, y'know), nonetheless sums up Harms' own view succinctly and with undeniable pride. "Two-Steppin' Texas Blue" may genuflect too much toward Strait's uptempo side, but both the easygoing "Swing" and "That's the Way I Feel About You," back-to-back Western swing tracks, succeed both vocally and musically on their own merits. Her effortless execution of the ballads "When I Get Over You" and "A Woman Knows" are further enhanced by the sensitive "Catalog Dreams," evoking the feel of such Dolly Parton classics as "Coat of Many Colors" (she's one of Harms' songwriting idols). Ending with "Long Hard Ride," a spacious, expansive cowpuncher ballad, underscores the sweet simplicity of the entire album.

The Strait comparisons are inevitable. But when Harms sings "Some ways I'm modern as can be/But there's still a part of me/Makes me proud to be an old-fashioned girl," she sums up the spirit of this record about as well as any-

thing. It may be a square peg in the round hole of the business today, but it works for me. —RICH KIENZLE

The Tractors *Farmers in a Changing World* Arista 18878

The Tractors, a powerhouse Oklahoma band consisting of five top-flight former session and road musicians, made a big splash with their self-titled 1994 debut album, which sold a couple million copies.

Nearly five years later, The Tractors are back with *Farmers in a Changing World*, their second collection of masterfully conceived, expertly performed and exciting roots-style groove music that confidently incorporates styles as diverse yet consistently elemental as 50's Chuck Berry and Elvis rock riffs, 60's Memphis R&B, New Orleans-flavored swamp boogie and Texas-style honky tonk.

Yet, unlike the great riff-driven music of yesteryear which The Tractors draw on so heavily—whether it's Chuck Berry, early Elvis, Booker T. & The MG's or even more recent masters like Dr. John and Creedence Clearwater Revival—their high-energy, good-timey revival music tends not to stick with you too long after the party's over.

As impressive and compelling as The Tractors' musicianship and musical esprit de corps is, the band's essential power lies in its uncanny knack for reviving and melding these classic styles—as opposed to transcending them. Instrumentally, this approach works well. But the tongue-in-cheek lyrics of songs like "I Wouldn't Tell You No Lie" and "Linda Lou" are so full of hackneyed early rock and R&B imagery that they make these otherwise fine tracks sound overly imitative.

Even the gravity of "The World's Biggest Fool," the only ballad on the album, is

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undercut by the self-consciously hokey lyrics that sound like they were cribbed from a *Cliffs Notes* guide to great honky-tonk tearjerkers of yesteryear.

Lead singer/guitarist Steve Ripley has a reedy, gritty voice that is immensely appealing most of the time. But occasionally, on tongue-in-cheek cuts like "The Elvis Thing" (Oh, boy! Another Elvis "tribute" song!) and "I Wouldn't Tell You No Lie," he merely sounds too cool for school, and maybe even a little snide.

On a couple of songs, like "Poor Boy Shuffle," The Tractors do manage to meld the power of their influences into music that sounds not only vital, but original. But for the most part, their artistry and musical sophistication lies far more in their tasteful revivalist skills than in any sort of landmark innovation.

—BOB ALLEN

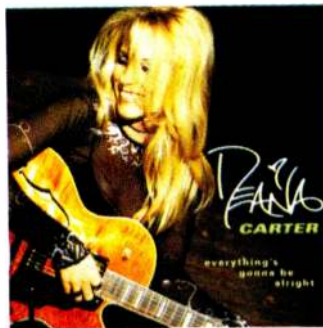
Deana Carter

Everything's Gonna Be Alright
Capitol 21142

Deana Carter was a tasty surprise when she debuted with "Strawberry Wine" from her album *Did I Shave My Legs For This?* For one thing, it was a bittersweet, grown-up's recollection. And the album had a certain sparkle, humor and energy lacking in so many formulaic Nashville records here on the cusp of the millennium. It led Deana to numerous auxiliary opportunities, such as singing for the soundtracks to *Hope Floats*

and *Anastasia*. On numerous television appearances she came off as a poster girl for the Nashville-by-way-of-L.A. bare-foot intelligentsia set: hip, drawling, gracefully aging ingenue far above the beer and sawdust smell of country music's roots.

This collection supposedly "picks up where *Legs* left off," but the freshness and energy of *Legs* is missing, and the conceits are a little too ethereal for me. What I liked were the more intimate, accessible tunes such as "Absence of the Heart," a tale of a relationship that has run out of passion. Carter excels at this sort of thing. But too often Carter's ballads get lost in the airy vagaries of adult pop music. Her faster songs suffer from self-conscious, stretchy stylism, the "hey, look-what-I-can-do" clatter of syncopated bongo rhythms and soft-rock versions of Latin jazz fusion guitar, swarms of violins and a veritable parade of smooth R&B clichés.



The conceit of spelling "Colour Everywhere" with the British spelling of "color" is weirdly condescending. Melanie's bouncy, giggling, child-like 1971 double entendre come-on, "Brand New Key," comes off a little strained in the late 90's by a woman who made her name singing "Strawberry Wine"—I don't care if they did modulate the key halfway through. And "Angels Working Overtime" is way too musically sophisticated for its waitress-and-truckdriver lyric.

Deana Carter seemed fresh, funny, earthy and independent last year. With this new set, she settles in as just another clone.

—BOB MILLARD

Lorrie Morgan

Secret Love
BNA 67627

Amid the disposable talents served up by Music Row on a monthly basis, Lorrie Morgan has been a beacon. Her continuing triumph comes from keeping one foot in the past and the other in the here and now, mixing vulnerability and assertiveness with an intuitive feel for the right material. That combination made possible achievements like *Something in Red* and *Greater Need*, records that epitomize how this music should evolve. With that pedigree, I'd have trusted her to succeed with anything, even her dream project: a collection of luxuriantly arranged pop standards, reflecting a love of such material passed down to her by her late father, Hall of Famer George Morgan. If any Nashville singer could add chanteuse to her palette, she'd be the one.

Or so I thought. Stated simply, this well-intentioned effort never gets off the ground, and there's ample blame to go around. Material is the first problem. Morgan picked a few of the greatest songs of all time: the joyously optimistic "Secret Love" has been recorded by a myriad of pop singers (as well as Slim Whitman). Harold Arlen's "I've Got the World On a String," the Ira and George Gershwin masterpiece "They Can't Take That Away From Me," and Johnny Burke-Jimmy Van Heusen's immortal ballad, "Here's That Rainy Day," are pillars of American popular song. Sadly, those gems were mixed with paste, in the form of third-rate movie tunes like "Summer of '42," the vapid lounge standard, "Fly Me to the Moon," and the maudlin "I Wish You Love."

Producer Richard Landis recruited some of Nashville's better jazz players, among them veteran pianist Beegie Adair, to play competently, occasionally swinging backup only to nullify that fine musicianship with

Tom Bruner's wooden, decidedly uncreative string orchestrations. They not only lack the stylish flair of earlier Nashville arrangers like Bill McIlhenny, they reek of contrivance, oozing over Morgan's voice like so much artificial pancake syrup.

Sadly, Morgan proves her own worst enemy in the end. While Willie reflected versatility on his pop masterpiece,



Stardust, Morgan comes off a distaff Nashville version of Johnnie Ray, who enjoyed brief pop superstardom in the early 50's. On her other albums, her greatest strength is a vocal "twang" that injects spice and a traditional feel into her vocals. Here, that strength proves her undoing. She constantly oversings on songs that demand subtle vocal colorings, clashing horribly with both the songs and the already-flawed arrangements. In the end, her believability is undermined to the point that she sounds out of place on her own record, particularly on (among others) "World on a String" and the Billie Holiday ballad, "Good Morning Heartache."

On the two John Gary ballads, however, Morgan manages to avoid oversinging, creating stately renditions of "Once Upon a Time" and "My Foolish Heart." These become the album's strongest performances, which leave one to imagine what could have been had she shown similar restraint elsewhere.

So there you have it. A review I didn't enjoy writing, of a singer I still consider one of today's best. She had a terrific idea and got a shot at pulling it off. I only wish she had.

—RICH KIENZLE

STEVE WARINER

Suite for a Common Man



Steve Wariner was there when the Outlaws were in vogue, he was there through the Urban Cowboy craze, and he was there when legends meant something. And he's still there, with Number Ones, CMA's, Grammys and the like. Times have changed and the music's changed, but Steve Wariner's remained the same.

by Michael Bane

There is a truism that goes something like, "The farther you get from Nashville, the closer you are to Tennessee."

That thought occurs to me as I'm waiting to pass across a one-lane stone bridge weaving along a country road on the way to Steve Wariner's house. I'm only a couple of dozen miles outside of Music City, but some of these worn stones probably remember the sound of Civil War muskets. I've just come from a city where no one actually remembers last week, or, at least, will admit they do.

Which makes the saga of Steve Wariner all the more compelling. Amazing enough for a performer to have not only his own Number One hit, but to co-write a Number One hit each for Garth Brooks and Clint Black, write and sing a Number One duet (with Anita Cochran) and collect both Country Music Association and TNN/*Music City News* statuettes...all in a six-month period. Oh yeah, there's a Grammy in there somewhere, too. But this is an artist who—and don't breathe a word of this to anyone in

Nashville—actually remembers the 1970's. Heck, he was there...

With Number One hits...

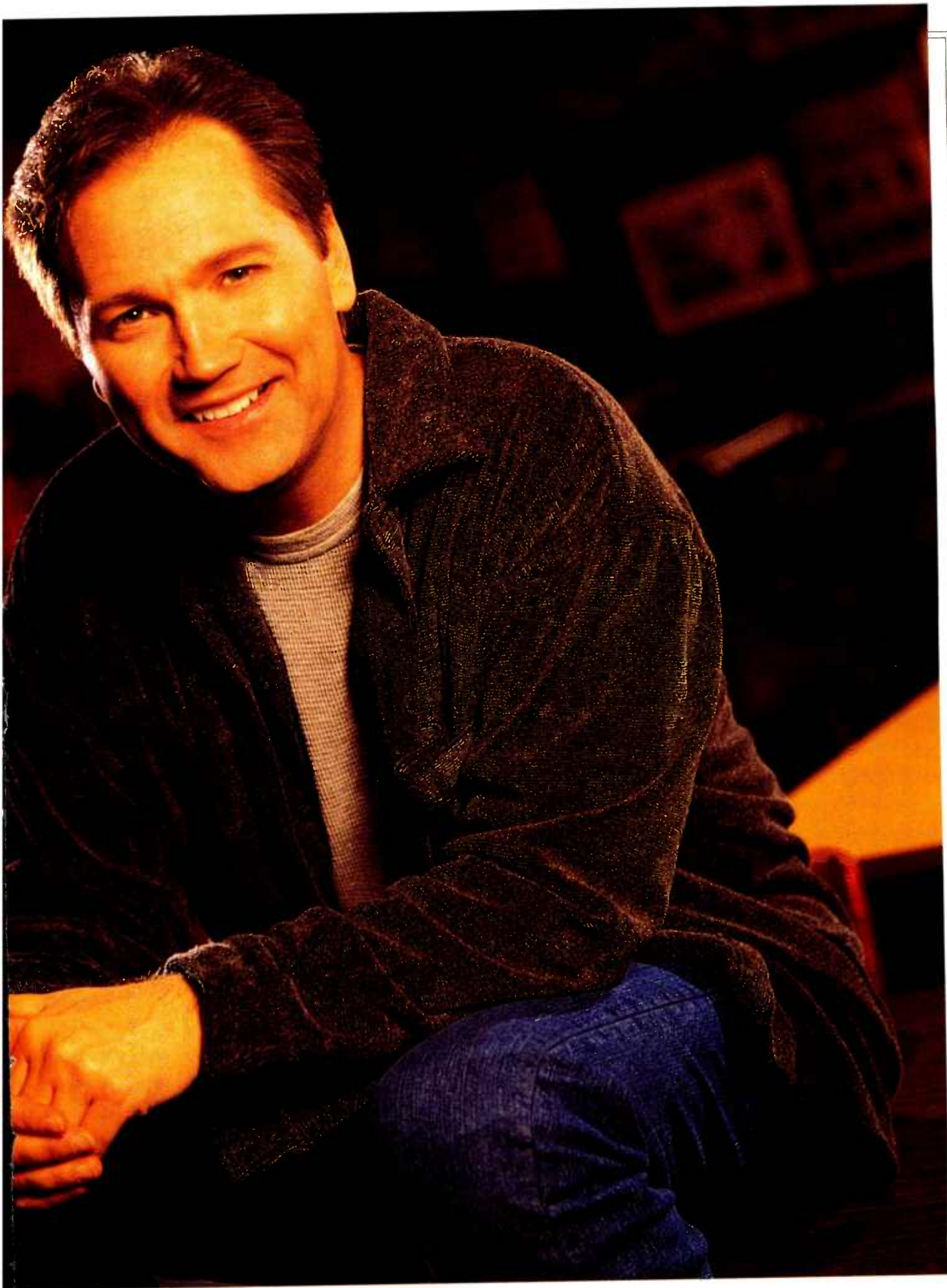
Picking and singing with the legends...

When I get to Steve Wariner's sprawling estate, he's standing on the front porch waiting, shirt-tail out, the very image of a guy without a care in the world. A quick tour includes the kitchen, where son Ryan, 14 and media-wise, is doing a clay animation video for school. Greek temples, slayers, that sort of thing. Younger son Ross picks guitar.

He is, Steve Wariner explains, sort of getting back in the harness, getting used to interviews and video spots and even the road all over again. So forgive him if he's a little rusty. It has been, after all, three years since he decided to forego performing and concentrate on his songwriting.

"My son Ryan told me recently that who'd have thought being a bum for three years would've paid off like this?" he says, easily,



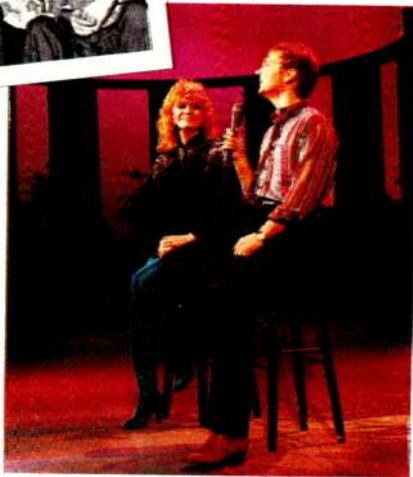




Steve's musical family laid the foundation. In a band with his brother at age 15, and the whole clan in 1959.



Steve joined Dottie West at age 18, and his career was off and running. At right, the two of them on *Music City Tonight*. Below, with Marty Gamblin and Glen Campbell. At one point, Steve was compared to Glen.



Always the instrumentalist. Below, Leo Kotke and Chet Atkins joined him in 1996 for *No More Mr. Nice Guy*. Chet's been a major influence since the beginning.



and we turn on the tape recorder.

The conversation immediately turns to...watercolors. Lots of performers dabble in painting; Steve Wariner is an artist. His finely wrought watercolors have a hint of the Southwestern influence, a deft control of color and the illusion of movement.

"Art was my first love," he says. "I was going to be a painter. Strange how things happen, isn't it?"

What happened to Steve Wariner, on the way to college to become an artist, was Dottie West. Wariner had been playing in his father Roy's band since he was nine years old. In his senior year of high school, he was singing and playing bass at a little club near his home in Indianapolis, Indiana. The owner of the club started bringing in some "name" Nashville acts, with Wariner's guys as the house band.

One Saturday night, he had a chance to sit in with Dottie West's band—"I was a huge Dottie fan"—and even do a song himself. The song he chose was "Shelly's Winter Love."

"At the time, I had no idea Dottie's daughter was named Shelly," he says. "So I'm singing this song up there, and I hear this incredible harmony. Of course, Dottie hasn't even been on yet. But I hear this harmony, and I look over and Dottie's on stage, singing with me. The short story is that they were looking for a bass player that could sing, and they offered me the job that night."

First, he demurred, wanting to finish his senior year. But both his father and his high school teachers helped him graduate early, so he could go on the road.

"And months later, I'm sitting at Dottie's house, and she tells me Merle Haggard wrote 'Shelly's Winter Love' for her daughter," Steve laughs. "I swear, it never occurred to me until that moment what I'd done! I had no clue."

Certain things, he says, are meant to happen.

He remembers driving home at "90 miles an hour" to tell his parents. His father, a former musician himself, said, "That's great!" His mom, perhaps predictably, started crying.

Back in the Old Days, I say, didn't you take some hits for being "too pop"? This gets a big laugh, as in the New Nashville World Order, Steve Wariner is as country as they get. When he stops laughing, he says, "You hit me, didn't you?"

Egads! The curse of memory!

"Just joking," says Steve, as I mentally sift through hundreds of stories and record reviews. "But yep, I did. And going back and listening to some of those old records, I can see why. People said I was too much like Glen Campbell—I was produced by Tom Collins back then—and we did go for those big strings. For that time, though, they were...well, they were hits. What's funny, Michael, is that I remember reading and hearing people say that I was so young, that I needed to live a little bit. Of course, my competition back then was Merle Haggard and Conway Twitty. I remember people saying, 'You're not wrinkled and worn enough...You've got to live it...' And nowadays, if you've lived a little too much, you're too old! Nowadays, it's teenagers making records."

Do you, I ask, find yourself looking at young performers today and saying, "They're too young..."

"What amazed me was when Bryan White came along and started saying all this stuff in magazines about me," Steve says. "Seems like everything I'd pick up with a story about him was saying what an influence I was. And that really hit me hard! I was so flattered, but, man, an influence!"

A young Bryan White faithfully attended Steve Wariner concerts and waited patiently to talk to Steve after the shows.

"He had the fire," Steve remembers. "But, man, when he started getting big, and I started reading my name, I thought, the world is definitely changing. But, you know, I do the same thing with Chet Atkins. I still look at myself as a kid, studying with someone like Chet or Jerry Reed. I guess time kind of slips up on you is what it is. You turn around, it's a different era."

That is, I say, the trick with being a Renaissance Man—singer, songwriter, producer, fine artist. When one thing drops

off, there's always something else.

"You know, I was saying that to somebody the other day," Steve says. "I was saying something like, 'When the audiences go away again,' and they were sort of shocked at me. But, the audience will go away again. It happens. I've been on all ends of that."

But it's come back around for you again, I say. The audience came back.

"But this time, I'm not really...not really...well, when the records started hitting again, I started getting nice offers to play here or play there. But we just said, let's be choosy," he says. "I don't want to abandon what got me back here, which is songwriting. I'm trying to be a little choosier, a little pickier about where I'm playing. I mean, not that I'm too good to play someplace. But if the date didn't make a lot of sense, or it was a tough routing, or I just didn't want to play there, I passed on it. I want to stay home and write."

But it's more than that, Steve Wariner continues. It's that age thing, being older and, hopefully, wiser.

"I want to say that I appreciate it more than I did," Steve says. "I think that when I was younger and had a string of hits in the mid-80's—ten Number Ones in a row at that time—I was so caught up in it, having fun, being on the road. I mean, you feel invincible...oh man, six in a row...seven in a row...eight in a row...man, you don't even think it can go away at any time. In my case, certainly, you take it for granted. I think now that I really appreciate it a lot more, and I don't take it for granted. I understand it a little better, now, too."

He quickly pantomimes a 24-year-old Steve Wariner on the road... "Bring it on! Bring it on! A dozen more dates? Bring 'em on! I can make that trip! Drive all night? No problem!"

He just shakes his head.

"I guess that's all a part of growing up, though, isn't it?" he says. "I don't want to be gone all the time. I love the studio. I love that creation process that happens in the studio. I think I expected to miss the road more than I actually did. I guess you've heard this before—I love the audience; I don't love the road. I miss the creative input of the audience, but I think that writing and studio work fills that creative void, to a certain extent. Sometimes I feel like a mad scientist up there in the studio...let's see, what can I do to this song?"

Most musicians, I say, have to have a gun held to their head to get them into the studio. "That's for sure," he says, "but I think I get a lot of that from Chet..."

Probably the single biggest thing that set Steve Wariner apart from the hordes of aspiring musicians who began flooding Nashville in the mid-1970's—aside from the fact that he didn't claim any bizarre linkages to Willie Nelson or Texas—was his virtuosity with a guitar. At a time when country music was running full tilt toward three-chord honky tonk slammers, young Steve Wariner worked to master the stylings of his idol, guitar god Chet Atkins.

That virtuosity wasn't lost on the Master, either. Atkins became a mentor for the young picker, hiring him to play bass in Atkins' band and shepherding Wariner's career in its earliest days. He even produced Wariner's first records.

"Chet was my first producer," says Steve. "I was recording my first four songs, and the session was crazy. It was the day after Elvis Presley died, and, of course, the TV networks all wanted to talk to Chet during my session. I'll never forget that day."

Despite his tales to the contrary, Steve Wariner proved to be a canny young artist. Rather than tout himself as going head-on against a field of country music legends, Wariner concentrated on learning performance from the ground up. He worked the road steadily through the late 1970's, a virtual traveling apprenticeship that paid off with his first Top Ten song, "Your Memory," in 1980—which also resulted in the "firing" of Wariner from Chet's band. For the next ten years, Steve Wariner was a force to be reckoned with on the country music charts, with one Number One after the other.



When step-daughter Holly got married, Steve's sons Ross and Ryan joined the celebration.



The tables turned on Steve when Bryan White described him as "an influence."



More idols. Steve with Whisperin' Bill Anderson and, below, baseball's Nolan Ryan. Ryan's even on the Nice Guy album.



Sometimes wishes do come true. Three CMA's in 1998, and now even a CMM cover. Steve once joked with CMM's Russ Bornord about our coverage. Over the years Steve's remained the same.



COURTESY: HEBBUN

As the radio hits began to burn themselves out, Wariner turned to his other loves, the guitar and producing. In 1996, Wariner conceived and produced an amazing instrumental album, *No More Mr. Nice Guy*, a pun on his reputation as the nicest guy in country music. The album featured not only mentor Chet Atkins, but also Vince Gill (whose talents as a picker are prodigious), Bela Fleck, Leo Kotke, Mark O'Conner, Larry Carlton, Richie Sambora and many others, including the now grown up, and artist in his own right, Bryan White. Even baseball star Nolan Ryan, another Wariner hero, makes an appearance on the single-sentence spoken intro. The album ranges from understated elegance to barroom rockers and, to me, captures the "guitar-pullin'" magic that used to make Nashville one of the most special places on earth for musicians. The two threads that wind through *No More Mr. Nice Guy* are an abiding, almost worshipful, love of the guitar and a sense of joy at picking.

"The main thing was to have fun," Steve Wariner says. "We just left the machines on, and we were laughing and joking and playing. I told everyone up front that there was no pressure on this because I know it won't get on the radio. So just play whatever you want to. I'm making this one for me."

Not surprisingly, *No More Mr. Nice Guy* was nominated for a Grammy. That year, however, the Grammy went to someone else—Chet Atkins. A week later, Atkins gave his Grammy to Steve, saying that his former protégé was the one who really deserved it.

"I still call Chet every so often and say, 'What should I do?'" Steve says.

Songs are strange, Steve Wariner is saying. Sometimes, a song will just fall out of nowhere—WHAM!—a lightning bolt from the blue. Other times, you labor and labor for weeks, writing and rewriting and rewriting.

"I like to co-write, too," he says. "The neat thing about co-writing is understanding your role. For me, the way it works the best is, I come into a situation with my co-writer, and I'm thinking I need to shut up and listen. I'm with a Jim Rushing or a Jim Weatherly, and these guys are major writers. Initially, at the start of the writing session, I'm sitting back and listening to what they have to say. Then I'll put my two cents in if it's called for."

He keeps a notebook of song ideas, just waiting for a chance to get back to the home studio or with a co-writer. Unlike many songwriters, Wariner shifts easily from the music guy to the word guy, depending on the co-writer.

"Bill Anderson, for example, is a heavy, heavy lyricist, so I'm more on the music side," he says. "Some people you write with

don't even play instruments, and some are brilliant musicians."

How many top-level lyricists, I say, are also world-class musicians? It's an extremely rare talent. Steve Wariner looks embarrassed. "Well, yes, it's not that common. But a song always starts with the hook, with the idea. That's the great thing about songwriters in this town—they know you need the idea."

Take his comeback record, "Holes in the Floor of Heaven," which Wariner co-wrote with regular writing partner Billy Kirsch.

"Billy was sitting right where you are, talking about writing, having some coffee," Steve says. "My idea for that morning was to write something fast and uptempo, which shows you the kind of brilliant guy I am. My wife Caryn—who's also my publisher—was in the kitchen, and she came in and said that we ought to write something sensitive, a story song."

"Well, Billy says, 'Don't laugh at me now, but I heard this phrase. Actually, my wife heard somebody say this, so don't make fun of me if it's stupid, but I think it's pretty cool...'" All right, I said. Enough. What is it? He hesitates and then says, "Holes in the floor of heaven?"

Steve Wariner starts laughing again.

"I thought, oh man, there it is!" he says, and the two began frantically swapping phrases. In a few hours, the song—a future Number One—was done.

"When I was first starting out, I was afraid to speak up, thinking—like Billy—that people were going to laugh at me," he says. "But you've got to get past all that and say what you think. A lot of times I'll be with a co-writer and say, 'How about...,' and you can see them roll their eyes. But you can't be intimidated by that. You might have to go through three or four dumb lines before you get to that really good one."

And, Steve says, there's the legendary advice from the late Roger Miller to young songwriters everywhere: "Don't get your change and your pills mixed up in your pocket! I think I took 35 cents a few minutes ago."

"I asked Roger once if he'd ever played low down on the neck of his guitar," Steve says. "Roger says, 'No, I pretty much stick to the middle of the neck. That's where the money is.'"

We laugh and swap stories for a while, and I think both of us came to the realization that we were both very lucky, arriving on the country music scene when the giants still walked.

"Man, I think about that a lot, how lucky I was to come to town when I did," he says. "I remember lower Broadway, the old Opry. Working with Dottie, I met Kris Kristofferson, Red Lane, Roger Miller, Willie Nelson...it was so great. I am so glad I tasted that era of country—playing the Opry when it was still at the Ryman. Now, that era is all folklore, our mythology. I was a wide-eyed kid, just flipping out."

And Steve Wariner doesn't forget. "This music is all about heritage, about roots. When I was young, I don't think I really understood that. But roots is what this is all about. Where we've come from, and where we're going."

He's just finished producing an album on Whisperin' Bill Anderson that consists of—with one exception—all new material.

"I just love Bill Anderson," Steve says. "Obviously, there's this incredible talent as a writer, but what I really like about him is that he has never rested on his laurels. He's always coming up with great stuff."

"I had a Number One hit with 'Tips of my Fingers,' and so did a lot of other people," he says. "So we got a lot of them together for this album."

What is it that Steve Wariner still wants to do?

"I want to do what feels right in my heart, and if people like it, that's wonderful," he says.

We've been laughing and swapping stories for hours now, and Steve is still laughing.

"Heck, I'd like to win one of those CMA awards, just for the heck of it," he says. "I used to agonize about stuff like that, but, man, that'd be neat!"

So congratulations, Steve Wariner, on your 1998 CMA awards. Nice guys do, occasionally, finish first. ■

TOP 25



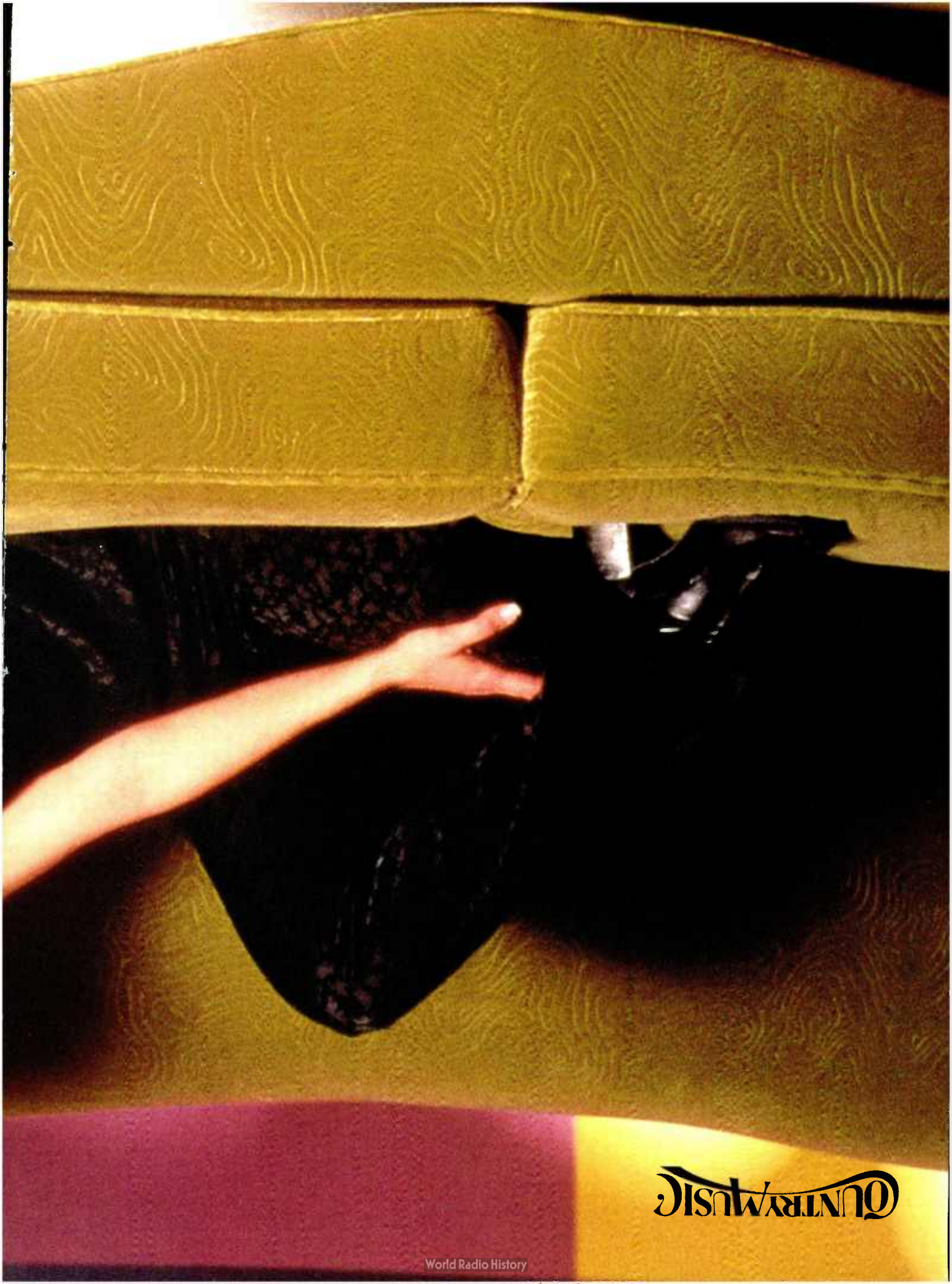
Albums

1. Shania Twain *Come On Over*
2. Dixie Chicks *Wide Open Spaces*
3. Various Artists *Hope Floats (soundtrack)*
4. Faith Hill *Faith*
5. Toby Keith *Greatest Hits Volume 1*
6. Alabama *For the Record: 41 Number One Hits*
7. Alan Jackson *High Mileage*
8. Various Artists *Touched by an Angel: The Album*
9. Deana Carter *Everything's Gonna Be Alright*
10. Vince Gill *Breath of Heaven—A Christmas Collection*
11. Brooks & Dunn *If You See Her*
12. Tim McGraw *Everywhere*
13. Mark Wills *Wish You Were Here*
14. Garth Brooks *Sevens*
15. Reba McEntire *If You See Him*
16. Jo Dee Messina *I'm Alright*
17. Garth Brooks *The Limited Series (boxed set)*
18. Vince Gill *The Key*
19. George Strait *One Step at a Time*
20. LeAnn Rimes *Sittin' on Top of the World*
21. Martina McBride *White Christmas*
22. Bill Engvall *Dorkfish*
23. Trisha Yearwood *Where Your Road Leads*
24. Diamond Rio *Unbelievable*
25. Martina McBride *Evolution*

Singles

1. Dixie Chicks *Wide Open Spaces*
2. Lee Ann Womack *A Little Past Little Rock*
3. Ty Herndon *It Must Be Love*
4. Faith Hill *Let Me Let Go*
5. George Strait *We Really Shouldn't Be Doing This*
6. Collin Raye *Someone You Used to Know*
7. Brooks & Dunn *Husbands & Wives*
8. Terri Clark *You're Easy on the Eyes*
9. Garth Brooks *It's Your Song*
10. Alan Jackson *Right on the Money*
11. Clay Walker *You're Beginning to Get to Me*
12. Alabama *How Do You Fall in Love*
13. Wade Hayes *How Do You Sleep at Night*
14. Martina McBride *Wrong Again*
15. Aaron Tippin *For You I Will*
16. Mark Wills *Don't Laugh at Me*
17. Tim McGraw *Where the Green Grass Grows*
18. Deana Carter *Absence of the Heart*
19. BlackHawk *There You Have It*
20. Shania Twain *Honey, I'm Home*
21. Randy Travis *Spirit of a Boy, Wisdom of a Man*
22. Toby Keith *Getcha Some*
23. Lonestar *Everything's Changed*
24. Tim McGraw *For a Little While*
25. Jo Dee Messina *Stand Beside Me*





COUNTRY MUSIC



JO DEE MESSINA

COUNTRY MUSIC MAGAZINE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1999

PULL-OUT
CENTERFOLD
OF-THE-MONTH

JO DEE MESSINA

Facts of Life

Personal Data

Given Name: Jo Dee Messina
Birthdate: August 25, 1970
Family: Mother, Mary (also her Fan Club President); brother, Vinnie; sisters, Marianne and Teresa
Hometown: Holliston, Massachusetts
Pets: Three dogs, two cats, one rabbit
Instruments: piano, guitar, saxophone

Vital Statistics

Height: 5'3"
Color eyes: Hazel
Color hair: Red

Recording Career

Record Label: Curb Records, 47 Music Square East, Nashville, Tennessee 37203

Albums	Release Date
<i>Jo Dee Messina</i>	1996
<i>I'm Alright</i>	1998*

*Gold album (500,000 sold)

Singles

"Heads Carolina, Tails California"
"You're Not in Kansas Anymore"
"Do You Wanna Make Something of It"
"Bye, Bye"
"I'm Alright"
"Stand Beside Me"

Videos

"Heads Carolina, Tails California"
"Do You Wanna Make Something of It"
"Bye, Bye"
"I'm Alright"
"Stand Beside Me"

Awards & Nominations

1998: Nominated for Country Music Association (CMA) Horizon Award, and for Video of the Year for "Bye, Bye"/CMT Top Twelve Videos of the Year for "I'm Alright" (Number 12)



1997: Nominated for *Music City News*/TNN Viewers Choice Awards Star of Tomorrow
1996: Winner, Boston Music Awards Best Country Artist

Quotable

- "I have a real problem with being honest...I can't not be. I was raised in a very connected community, where everyone was approachable and friendly. Everyone was honest, so I have a difficult time with things that aren't real. That's just the way I was raised, and it's who I am."
- "To me, songs have to say something I can relate to or would actually say. I have to be able to represent it, and I have to be able to feel it. Otherwise, I'm not doing myself or the song any justice."

- "My character is to give—it's not about being a success in the music business. It's about doing for others and giving of one's self. When I'm out there and people say my songs touch them, help them, maybe change their life, *that's* why I do it. It gives the music a purpose, and me a reason for doing this."

Selected Favorite Things

Influences: Reba McEntire, Dottie West, Dolly Parton, Patsy Cline
Favorite Movie: *Steel Magnolias*
Favorite TV Show: *Seinfeld*
Favorite Actress: Julia Roberts, Sally Field
Favorite Meal: Breakfast, eggs
Favorite School Subject: Math, English
Greatest Living Person: Oprah Winfrey
Guilty Pleasure: Chocolate
Favorite Video She's Made: "Stand Beside Me"
Favorite Song She's Recorded: "Even God Must Get the Blues"

Tidbits

- Jo Dee made her performing debut at six years old at a tap dance recital and got her big break on a radio show called *Live at Libby's*.
- Jo Dee says the best advice she's ever been given was from Charlie Daniels, who said, "It's not how many times you get knocked down, it's how many times you get back up."
- Jo Dee has been involved with the following charities: T.J. Martell Foundation, St. Jude's Children's Hospital, Vanderbilt Children's Hospital.
- Fellow Curb artist Tim McGraw co-produced both of Jo Dee's albums for the label.

Fan Club

Jo Dee Messina International Fan Club, P.O. Box 8013, Hermitage, TN 37076.

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Lee Ann Womack

Brings the Past Into the Present

The first thing you hear on “A Little Past Little Rock” are the fat, humming notes of an electric guitar, a soothing string chart and a boom-ticka drum part. It’s a very 90’s, pop-country sound, tailor-made for today’s radio.

When Lee Ann Womack opens her mouth, however, time gets scrambled. Because out comes a soprano so full of rural twang and emotional scarring that it could have originated in a Dolly Parton or Loretta Lynn session in 1968. Perhaps a Lynn vocal was broadcast into outer space where it got lost before striking a satellite and bouncing back to earth 30 years later.

Womack, who’s only 32 herself, sings of being so devastated by a romantic break-up that it’s not enough to just move out of the house. She has to move out of the whole damn town and keep driving until she can leave the memory behind. How far from Dallas does she have to go? “I’m a little past Little Rock,” she sings, “but a long way from over you.” She delivers the line not with the showy fireworks of a modern Music Row diva but with the trembling reluctance of a 1960’s honky-tonk angel forced to talk about a deep, deep hurt.

It would be wrong, though, to describe Womack as a throwback to an earlier era, for she’s far more complicated and far more interesting than that. “A Little Past Little Rock” was a huge hit this past fall not because of the contemporary arrangement, not because of the vintage vocal, but because of the strange tug-of-war between the two. Like most Americans, country fans carry in their heads the world of their childhood, a world which barely resembles what they see every day. No one captures that daily collision of old and new better than Womack.

For example, “A Little Past Little Rock” evokes a bygone culture where romantic failure is so painful, so shameful that jumping in a car and driving halfway across the country seems like a reasonable response. And Womack sings it as if she has adopted just such a scorched-earth policy in the past. But who’s that in the studio with her, singing the gorgeous male harmony part on the song? Why it’s her ex-husband, Jason Sellers.

When Womack shows up at her manager’s office on an autumn afternoon, she still has the deep drawl and gracious manners of her Texas childhood. Even in her high-heel black boots and voluminous hairdo, she’s a tiny woman. Her small, heart-

Combining the ache of classic country with the flair of the modern, Lee Ann Womack comes up with a sound that pleases both fans and radio.



by Geoffrey Himes

shaped face is dominated by huge, hypnotic eyes of luminous blue. And the bulge beneath her gray-knit pullover makes it clear she’s very pregnant.

So which is the real Womack? The old-fashioned, small-town Texas native who expects all-or-nothing from her man? Or the modern, cosmopolitan Nashville resident who remains friends with her former spouse and is about to become a single mom?

She’s both.

“I had such a great childhood,” she exclaims. “I grew up in a house my grandfather built, the same house my mother grew up in. My parents never got babysitters; we stayed home and played board games together on Friday nights. When I was a cheerleader, we all piled in the car and went to the football games together. I was protected and spoiled as a child. It wasn’t until I was an adult that I had to get a job and pay bills. It wasn’t until I was an adult that I was betrayed by a friend.

“When I came to Nashville, I discovered that not everyone worships the same God, not everyone votes Republican, not everyone is conservative. I went through a divorce here. I never had to go through my parents divorcing, and I feel guilty that my daughter has to go through that. But I also learned why divorce is sometimes necessary. I realized you can’t judge other people unless you’ve gone through the same thing.

“When I was growing up,” she adds, “I learned about the wrath of God in church but not about grace and forgiveness. I grew up in such a small town that I was a bit narrow-minded. I didn’t realize it at the time, but looking back I can see how judgmental I was. It wasn’t until I got to a big town that I became more broad-minded.”

Womack is hardly the first person to travel from a small town to a big city and encounter the crushing blows of betrayals and the broadening effects of diversity. Few others, though, have translated that difficult transition into music as effectively as Womack has. In her records, one hears a yearning for yesterday’s certainties and a recognition of modern messiness, state-of-the-art studio polish and state-of-the-heart vocal rawness.

When she sings the title track from her second Decca album, “Some Things I Know,” she rattles off a list of truisms (“As sure as I need the Lord above, that’s how much I need your love. I need shelter from the cold; some things I know”) that



could have come from her Sunday school class at the Central Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Texas. But she sings them with a tinge of melancholy, as if she realizes that not every man is true and not every homeless person finds shelter.

"There's an undercurrent of sadness in many of my songs," she agrees, "but that's just me. I don't go in and say let's make this positive song a little sad; it just comes out that way. I do hate sappy songs. It's like those sit-coms on TV where everything works out every week. They're not believable, because life's not like that. I want my songs to be believable."

In some of Womack's songs, sadness is not just an undercurrent; it's a raging, roaring river. Her first single, 1997's "Never Again Again," was a woman's sob-choked attempt to leave her lover. Womack's first Top Ten hit, 1997's "The Fool," is a

woman's heartbroken plea to her man's ex-lover, begging her to leave him alone. The song not only follows the story line of Dolly Parton's "Jolene" but achieves the same blend of throbbing ache and stubborn dignity. "The Fool" served as the template for the new album's Parton-esque ballads—"I'd Rather Have What We Had," "The Man Who Made My Mama Cry," "I Keep Forgetting" and "When the Wheels Are Coming Off."

"I don't know why I love sad songs so much," Womack wonders, "because I had such a great childhood. But even as a kid I just got lost in songs like George Jones' 'Grand Tour,' I listened to a lot of Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette, and I borrowed a lot of phrasing from their sad songs. If you grow up eating cornbread, that's what you like when you're older. I listened to those sad

songs when I was young, so maybe that's why I like them now.

"Those women actually lived what they sang about, and you don't hear that so much today. Maybe it's because today's singers are so young and haven't experienced that kind of pain. I think I get compared to those older women a lot not because I sound so much like them but because I feel that pain like they did."

I point out she didn't live through the experiences described in songs on the new album. She didn't leave town to get away from her ex-husband like the woman in "A Little Past Little Rock." She wasn't deserted by her father like the woman in "The Man Who Made My Mama Cry."

"Although I haven't lived through all those situations," she explains, "I've lived through parts of them. My dad never left us for more than ten minutes to go to the store, so that song is obviously not autobiographical. But I've been through a divorce and some other things, so I know what it's like to feel betrayed or abandoned. It's like playing a role; it requires some thought. What is this person feeling? What is she going to say next? When my dad heard 'The Man Who Made My Mama Cry,' he loved it. He knew it wasn't about him, and he loves those heartbreaking country songs."

Womack's father Aubrey was a country-music DJ for radio station KEBE in Jacksonville. When his daughter was too young to sing in bars by herself, he would take her to rehearse with the house band in the afternoon and then stick around to hear her sing at night. All she ever wanted to be was a country singer.

In 1984, at the age of 18, she packed up her Ford Stepside pick-up and headed for Nashville. She enrolled in Belmont College's music-business program and even served an internship as a "go-fer" for MCA Records. While at Belmont she married Sellers and in 1991 gave birth to a daughter named Aubrie. The dream was put on hold.

"The desire hadn't lessened," she insists. "I just got distracted by marriage and motherhood. If you want something from the time you're two or three years old, it doesn't go away. It's just that my daughter was more important those first two years. When she turned two, I started doing demos and showcases again. Tree signed me to a publishing deal, but I wanted a deal with a label as an artist. I thought Decca might have a spot for me, because they didn't have a traditional female vocalist. So I showcased for them late in '95, and they signed me in '96."

Frank Lidell, the Director of A&R for Decca, knew they had a rare singer on their hands—one who could not only hit the notes but make them ache. He also knew that Nashville was full of great singers who couldn't get arrested on radio. The key was finding Womack the right songs and the right producer. She had written one keeper, "Am I the Only Thing That You've Done Wrong," and Lidell found her "The Fool" and "Montgomery to Memphis." He also found her a producer, Mark Wright, who had had success with another old-fashioned Texan, Mark Chesnutt.

"If I had produced my albums," Womack admits, "they would have sounded like they were made 20-30 years ago. I'd love to make records like that, but radio would never play them. That's why Mark is so good for me. He can take a song like 'Never Again Again' and cut it in a way so it sounds very traditional and yet very modern at the same time. So when it comes on between Shania Twain and Mindy McCready, it will sound like it fits even if the vocal is very different. A lot of people call themselves producers, but all they do is hire the

musicians and direct traffic. Mark is a real producer."

The debut album, *Lee Ann Womack*, came out in 1997. The first single, "Never Again Again," was a Top 30 hit, and the follow-up, "The Fool," went to Number Two, as did "You've Got to Talk to Me." The album's fourth single, "Buckaroo," also hit the Top 30. Womack hit the road with George Strait, Randy Travis and Alan Jackson, and was nominated as Female Vocalist of the Year.

Even as her career was taking off, however, her personal life was crash landing. She finalized her divorce with Sellers in 1997 and had to work out a way he and she could not only share child-raising but also work in the same small world of the country-music industry. Sellers' appearance on "A Little Past Little Rock" is a measure of how far they've come.

"Jason and I have done a real good job of supporting each other's career and parenting a child together," Womack claims. "It requires a lot of work and a lot of patience. You have to make up your mind that you're not going to get ugly with the other person. Which is not to say we don't slip up every now and then. But I want what's best for Aubrie, and what's best for her is that Jason and I get along. I'm sure he approaches it the same way, because he wants what's best for her, too."

"As for singing together, I didn't call him in on 'Little Rock' to help out his career. I called him in because I needed someone with great pitch and great control. He came in without hearing the song and just knocked it out. He's so talented, it's scary."

With the divorce settled and the first album a big success, everything seemed set to run smoothly on the second album. Then Womack turned up pregnant.

"Obviously, it was a surprise," she confesses. "I can say it won't change anything, but I know it will. I take mothering very seriously. Fortunately, I have a manager [Erv Woolsey] who under-

stands that my children come first. In fact, sometimes he'll tell me I need to take some time off and spend it with Aubrie."

So who's the father, I wonder?

"I'm having the baby with Frank," she says, "Frank Lidell. We're discussing marriage and parenting, but we haven't made any decisions yet. Right now we still each have our own residence. But we're going to sit down soon and figure things out. Even though he does A&R for me, we don't spend lots of hours together at the office or in the studio. So when we're together in the evenings, it's just fun time. We keep work separate from home."

They should make an interesting couple. For Lidell is as progressive as Womack is traditional. After all, he was the person who signed Chris Knight and produced Knight's Steve Earle-like debut album. It was Lidell who convinced Womack to record a Jamie O'Hara song on each of her albums. And he also persuaded her not only to cut a Buddy and Julie Miller song on *Some Things I Know*, but also to use the Millers as back-up singers.

It's as if Womack senses she has a unique opportunity to be a bridge between country music's oldest traditions and newest possibilities. The tradition is in her bones, but she's still looking for the alternatives, and Lidell is helping her find the way.

"When I first came to Decca," Womack recalls, "Frank gave me a Buddy Miller album, and it just killed me. Some people on Music Row consider Buddy really left-field, but that's why Frank and I love him. I get sick of hearing the same thing over and over on country radio—the same chord changes, the same players. I want to hear something different sometimes." ■



Lee Ann, up for Female Vocalist of the Year, at the 1998 CMA Awards with Frank Lidell.

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THE FRANKLIN MINT

KENNY CHESNEY

Chasing Stardom One Step at a Time

In an era when record executives have short attention spans for artists who can't hit the million sales mark, and labels routinely give the boot to singers whose careers don't take off like a shot out of a cannon, Kenny Chesney is a bit of a special case.

After four albums which have yielded a handful of Number One singles, three Number One videos and two Gold album awards over the past few years, Chesney is starting to inch slowly toward platinum with his fourth album, *I Will Stand*. Released in 1997, it resulted in two chart-toppers ("She's Got It All" and "That's Why I'm Here") and a Top Ten ("A Chance"), with the title tune climbing the charts at year's end.

Meanwhile Chesney's label, BNA, a subsidiary of RCA—which is not exactly known for its loyalty to mid-range-selling artists (Aaron Tippin and Lari White were both trimmed from RCA's roster in the recent past)—is not only standing by him, but promoting him full tilt. The expectation is that, before long, Chesney is going to break out and hit the big time in a big way. And certainly that's Chesney's hope, too.

"There's a lot of guys who came out with their first records when I did, and they don't have a record out there anymore or a tour bus going down the road," the 30-year-old East Tennessee-born singer notes with a shrug. "That's one reason I'm really excited just to be doing what I'm doing.

"Even though it's been a slow build for me, I've kind of weathered the storm," adds Chesney, who spent a hectic 1998 completing his fifth album, *Everywhere We Go*, set for release this spring, with the first single, "How Forever Feels," due out in December. Plus, he's been touring arenas with Alabama and Clay Walker and headlining his own shows at fairs across the U.S.

"As tiring as it was, last year was really a wonderful year," he acknowledges with a weary grin. "We had a really big hit with 'That's Why I'm Here'—that song has probably had more impact than any other record I've had. Except for the bus accident [more on that later] it's really made the road a lot of fun, and we've had more people than ever come see us play. It's really all just been a slow building process on the groundwork we've been laying in the last four years."

Obviously much of Chesney's staying power has to do with the fact that he has a well-earned reputation as one heck of a nice guy: an unpretentious, no-nonsense team player who approaches his music as commercial art and the business of his music as business. Offstage, the East Tennessee State University graduate (he's got a degree in advertising and marketing) is friendly, forthright and accommodating, in a brisk but pleasant kind of way.

On a recent promotional swing through the greater Maryland-Virginia-Baltimore-D.C. area, which included visits to radio stations and in-store performances/autograph sessions at a northern Virginia Wal-Mart and a Baltimore area shopping mall, Chesney more or less made himself available to anyone even halfway interested in his music. He showed up at WAYZ, a country station just over the Maryland line in Greencastle, Pennsylvania, wearing a tan crew neck sweater, a Yankees baseball cap ("I just came from New York!" he explains) and wire rim glasses. "I'm 30, ya know!" he laughs. "I never wore glasses till recently."

During an on-air interview at the station, the DJ points at the Yankees cap and asks bluntly, "Ya got any hair under there?" Chesney grins, doffs the ball cap and runs his hand through his thinning light brown hair: "Yeah, a little bit!" he jokes. "I shaved my head!"

Without the dramatic highs and lows experienced by some of his contemporaries, Chesney has been steadily building a career for the long haul.

by Bob Allen



Without the cowboy hat and with the glasses and baseball cap, Chesney is more or less incognito to fans who only know him from stage appearances, videos and album photos—he actually looks way more collegiate-looking than suburban cowboy. He nearly walks all the way down the hallway, across the lobby and out the front door of the radio station before some fans who've been waiting for an autograph even recognize him. He quickly corrects that oversight with big hugs, handshakes and autographs all around.

Fact is, he points out, the more people who recognize him, the better:

"I've spent this entire month visiting radio stations and doing in-store promos, just trying to get my face out there a little more," he explains.

Indeed, Chesney shakes hands, signs autographs, poses for pictures and steps up for interviews with the same eagerness to accommodate as a grassroots politician on the campaign trail. "With all the new artists out there right now, trying to put a face with the song you hear on the radio is getting a little harder," he explains.

Admittedly, that arduous process of putting the face with the music has been a long haul for Chesney in the years since he made his *Billboard* chart debut with "Whatever It Takes." Though his first chart singles for the Capricorn label (which went belly-up shortly after releasing *In My Wildest Dreams*, Chesney's 1993 debut album) only reached the mid-level on *Billboard's* charts, they nonetheless generated sufficient interest along Music Row to serve as the platform for his subsequently slow-building career with BNA Records. He still gets quite a few requests for early singles like "The Tin Man" to this day.

Certainly Chesney's earlier BNA Number Ones and Top Five singles like "Fall in Love," "All I Need to Know," "Me and You," "When I Close My Eyes" and "She's Got It All" helped match the music to the face. But "That's Why I'm Here," the third single from *I Will Stand*, is the closest thing he's thus far had to a so-called "career record." Even he is amazed at the impact the song has had on listeners. It's generated a couple thousand letters and e-mails from fans who've heard a little bit of their own lives reflected in the story-song about a man's struggle to overcome alcoholism. But there is one particular event that really helped crystallize the song's power for the man who sings it.

"I was at Fan Fair last June, and I was walking from one part of the Fairgrounds to another, and this little girl came up to me—she couldn't have been more than six or eight years old. She started hugging me and cryin' out there in front of everybody."

Chesney blinks and stares at the floor with a look of quiet amazement. "It was pretty intense. She said, 'I think your song helped my dad learn to love my mom more.'"

He thinks about this for a moment and shakes his head: "It kind of makes you realize the power of a song, ya know. Sometimes when you think you are just putting a song out there and hoping it'll get in the charts and hoping it'll sell records, you get so caught up in all that that you forget that you're maybe touching and changing lives with songs. 'That's Why I'm Here' is the first song I've had that's really done that."

Chesney insists that "That's Why I'm Here" is not based on his own personal experiences, or those of the song's co-writers, Mark Alan Springer and Shaye

Smith. Chesney's life, by his own account, has certainly involved a few hard times, but otherwise has been relatively free of trauma.

Chesney hails from Luttrell, Tennessee, the hometown of Chet Atkins, just a little northeast of Knoxville. "It's a beautiful part of the country," he says with a wistful smile. "The Smoky Mountains, Gatlinburg, University of Tennessee football in the fall. I love all that. It was a really great place to grow up."

As a kid, he admits he was far more eaten up with sports than music. "Growing up where I did you couldn't help but be consumed by country music. It's everywhere—Dolly Parton, Don Gibson and a lot of other greats are from my part of the country. But I never dreamed of being a singer as a kid. Never gave it a thought." He laughs: "I'm not one of those guys who will sit here and tell you that since I was four years old I knew I wanted to be a singer. I think it's bullshit when people say that anyway."

"Oh sure, I would sing with the radio all the time and sing in the shower, but nobody ever took any notice of me, and I never took it seriously. It wasn't like I just woke up one day and decided, 'I'm gonna be a country singer!' It just happened. It just evolved into what I did."

He actually got a relatively late start. It wasn't until Chesney was attending the university that he got a guitar for Christmas in his sophomore year. "I started writing a few songs and practicing several hours a day, and learning more about it," he remembers. "Within a few months I started playing at places around the university—a barbecue joint called Quarter-back's and a little Mexican restaurant called Chucky's Trading Post. At the time I was one of the only guys up there in that music scene who was doing country. Back then, the whole scene up there was kind of blues and folk and rock. I was the only one singing George Jones and Hank Jr."

While he was still in college, he went into a Bristol, Virginia, recording studio and made a tape of his original songs to press up and sell at the clubs where he played. (Three of the musicians who backed him on those early Bristol sessions—Barry Bales, Adam Steffy and Tim Stafford—were friends and fellow students at ETSU who have since gone on to play in Alison Krauss' band, Union Station.) When he sold more than a thousand dollars' worth of the tapes and used the money to buy a new Martin guitar, he realized he was on to something.

"Out in those little clubs was the first time anyone ever put a bug in my ear that I was pretty good," he remembers. "That was when people first started telling me, 'Man, you really oughta try to do something with that.'"

In typical no-nonsense fashion, Chesney finished his university degree first. He graduated in December 1990, and promptly headed down Interstate 40 to Nashville in January 1991.

In Nashville, he ran into the usual blind alleys and brick walls for the first couple of years. Most publishers wouldn't listen to his songs, and those that did turned him down. He played a few "writers' nights" at listening rooms like The Bluebird Cafe, but soon realized that "there was nobody in the audience but other songwriters who wanted to get up and play their songs."

He made ends meet parking cars at a Music Row area restaura-



Kenny's in it for the long haul. Below, at work on NFL country album with the Colts' Peyton Manning. He first started singing when he was in school at ETSU.



rant called Rio Bravo. And for a while before that, he was the live entertainment in a Lower Broadway dive called The Turf. "The majority of the people in the audience were drunks and prostitutes, once the tourist season was over," he recalls. "But they had a great sound system and big crowds in the summer. It was a real honky tonk. Sometimes people would ask me, 'Aren't you scared down there?' I never was, because I got to know a lot of the guys down there who were living in the street, and I came to find out that often, if you look past a dirty shirt, you'll find a really good guy. I felt more safe down there than in the apartment complex where I was living at the time."

After countless turn-downs, Chesney finally got some people at Acuff-Rose, one of the oldest and most prestigious publishing houses in Nashville, to listen to his songs. Much to his surprise, he was soon hired as a staff songwriter. Not long afterward, a showcase at a local club landed him a contract with Capricorn Records.

After Capricorn folded, BNA not only signed Chesney but bought the masters to the *In My Wildest Dreams* album.

Admittedly the state fairs and arenas where Chesney performs these days (either headlining his own shows or opening for stars like Alabama and Clay Walker) are a lot taller cotton than the \$20 a night plus tips he used to get down at The Turf. Yet fatigue and the bad scare from last year's bus accident have taken a

little bit of a toll amidst these career advances.

"We were in Alabama, about 15 or 20 miles north of Fort Payne, when it happened," he recalls. "It was about five in the morning, and my fiancée, Mandy, and I were in the back of the bus asleep. All the sudden we felt the bus go off the road. I don't really know what happened or why, but we skidded and did a 180-degree and went about 800 feet down the road and went off the highway backwards. It was pretty intense. Fortunately no one was injured, but ever since then I really haven't been able to sleep on my bus. Every time it kind of drifts off the road or on the median a little bit, I wake up, and it takes me forever to get back to sleep. Usually I can't sleep till I get to the hotel, and it ruins my whole day, because I sleep all day long and then get up just in time for sound check and then go to my show."

"So as wonderful a year as it's been, it's been very tiring." He catches himself and chuckles softly: "But, man, I'm not complaining!"

The accident indeed proved to be only a small glitch in an otherwise fabulous year. What's more, sometime soon Chesney plans on getting married for the first time. Typically, it's not one of those made-in-show-biz match-ups. His fiancée, Mandy, is a fellow East Tennessean whom he's known since his ETSU days.

"It's a pretty wild story," he grins when asked how he and Mandy got together. "My mom cuts hair for a living, and she cuts Mandy's dad's hair. They started talkin' one day about their kids living in Nashville and describing where they lived. And come to find out, before I bought the house where I live now, Mandy and I lived in the same apartment complex and didn't even know it. So we hooked up, went out and got a beer and fell in love."

They're planning their upcoming wedding back in East Tennessee, at the same church that three generations of his family have attended. "It'll be a small wedding, only about 30 people," he adds with another grin.

"But we'll have a real big party afterwards!"



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By Cindy Shafer

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By Cindy Shafer

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A Free-“Wheeling” Q&A with the Renowned Singer-Songwriter

by George Fletcher

Besides being one of the biggest names on the folk/acoustic music circuit, Massachusetts-based singer/songwriter Cheryl Wheeler also has significant country credentials. She recorded the acclaimed *Circles & Arrows* album with producer Kyle Lehning for Capitol-Nashville in 1990, bringing her remarkable song, “Aces,” to public attention for the first time, and giving her a CMT video favorite with the humorous “Estate Sale.” Plus, her songs have been big hits for other country stars, Dan Seals—who had a Number One hit with her “Addicted” in 1988—and Suzy Bogguss—who brought “Aces” to the Top Ten in 1992—among them. Now recording for Rounder Records affiliate Philo, she’s about to release her third album for them (and sixth album overall), *Sylvia Hotel*, due out in late January. Touring the country with just herself and her guitar, Wheeler figures she does about 130 shows a year—which equates to about 35,000 miles a year on the road. She’s like the troubadours of the old school—a modern-day Will Rogers, someone once said. Her songs cover the full spectrum of life: from heart-breaking pain, to biting social commentary, to simple reflection, to just plain silly. When she was in Nashville recently to play the famed Bluebird Cafe, our own George Fletcher caught up with the travelling troubadour whose wit is as sharp as her lyrics.

CMM: *Much of your stuff is so intensely personal—and clearly something that you’re experienced—yet, it’s also universal. Someone else can hear it and say, “That’s me, I’ve lived that...”*

CW: Well, I guess it’s just because the sorts of things that I notice, that I find getting written into a song, are pretty typical things. There’s nothing highfalutin’ about my understanding of how things work. If there were, then I’d be writing songs where people would say, “What the heck is she talking about?” I think that I’m pretty typical in my reactions, and that comes through.

CMM: *You’ve talked about how there’s no rhyme or reason for why and when a song comes to you. If a song strikes you in the middle of doing something else, will you just stop and....*

CW: You don’t have to stop....I

mean, any time a song strikes you, it becomes what you’re doing, no matter what else you *seem* to be doing. You *seem* to be driving down the road, but you’re not, you’re writing that song. You *seem* to be standing on stage delivering a show, but you’re not, you’re writing that song. It’s just non-stop, rolling around in your head. It’s wonderful when I’m driving, because I find that I’m more lyric-oriented when I don’t have an instrument. Then it’s just a question of finishing them....

This spring I found this new tuning on the guitar, and I started playing and writing like I was insane! Every spare second I had, I would play guitar. And I did that for, like, two solid weeks. I mean, my hands got really weird, but I’d found this new tuning, and it made me write all these songs, and I loved it.

CMM: *So, how did your connection to Nashville get established.... How did Dan Seals first get hold of “Addicted”?*

CW: That was through Kyle Lehning. The story, as I understand it, is that Kyle was in California, visiting a friend who had a tape of mine, and who thought Kyle might like it. And so he heard it

and liked “Addicted” and pitched the song to Dan who, I think, was not as taken with it as Kyle—I think he liked it, but I don’t think he felt that it was necessarily a good song for him. But, then he decided that it was.

CMM: *Good choice. He had a Number One with it in 1988.*

CW: Yeah, lucky me! That was great. It was a total thrill to have a Number One song. But, as I’m sure you know, an awful lot of people do an awful lot of work for a song to get to Number One—it’s not just because it’s a good song. I mean, I like to think that “Addicted” is a good song, but I’ve heard a zillion good songs that didn’t go to Number One, and I’ve also heard some Number Ones that I couldn’t understand. So, I was just one element of that success.

CMM: *So, it was through Kyle that you hooked up with Capitol-Nashville?*

CW: Yes. When we went to Capitol, I always felt it was more Kyle who got the deal than me. They did a lot of stuff with Kyle.

CMM: *When you did the *Circles & Arrows* album for Capitol, it was during the time of Jimmy*



Cheryl performing recently in Nashville.

Bowen's reign there. He's considered a controversial figure—did you have much interaction with him?

CW: Well, I met him a couple of times, and he got involved, but he pretty much let me be. When we first signed to Capitol, Bowen wasn't there yet, and then, just a few months before we were ready to hand the project in, everyone we knew at Capitol got fired—which is not so unusual in this business—so, now there were all these new people at the label thinking, well, who's this folk singer person? Why is she here? But Bowen was very nice to me.

CMM: So your contact with him probably led to Suzy Bogguss covering "Aces."

CW: I don't know for sure, but I imagine he was instrumental in getting her to cover that tune. I remember we were in a meeting once when my record was getting ready to come out, and he was saying that for so many years women in country music had been singing songs that men had written, now we were starting to see women singing songs that they had written—which was really uncommon except with stellar exceptions like Loretta Lynn—and he said we need to get our women artists singing songs that women have written, because it makes a difference. And not long after that, Suzy had the "Aces" single. And she's recorded a couple more of my songs.

CMM: She did "Moonlight and Roses" on her latest.

CW: Yeah, and the other one was "Don't Wanna." And Kathy Mattea did "Further and Further Away" on her recent album.

CMM: And Sylvia, who was at your Nashville show last night, recorded one as well.

CW: That was "Soon As I Find My Voice." You know, I haven't heard that! I'd love to hear it.... I've had good luck. Bette Midler did one—on her *Bette of Roses* CD she did "I Know This Town." That was pretty neat. I had to write an extra verse for her version, though.

CMM: Once when I saw you live, you explained the story behind "Aces." I think a lot of people have wondered about it.

CW: There are three people in that story.... An old friend introduces two friends to each other at a party, but for various reasons—you know how people can be about their friends—says "Now, don't you two get involved." Of course, the two find they're great for each other and they do get involved. So the person who did the introducing is the one feeling hurt and betrayed, and the singer is saying to that person, "Well, you can't deal me the aces and think I wouldn't play."

CMM: A lot of times, your songs have been about people you know, like the older couple who are your neighbors in "Quarter Moon" or your dad in "75 Septembers." Have you ever gotten any response from your subjects about what they thought?

CW: Well, the neighbors in "Quarter Moon"—the wife, Ethel, has since died. But what Roland said was, "Well, you didn't even tell the whole story! You didn't tell them all how I met Ethel and how I brought her out here." And then he said, "And I'll tell you, I don't want any tour buses around the house!" [Laughs.] But he liked the song.

My father loves "75 Septembers," and is really proud of it. You know, Peter, Paul & Mary covered it. Dad was so thrilled—with the song, and that they'd recorded it. So I arranged for him to go to a show when they were in his area, and they brought

him backstage. I have a picture of him standing with them—it's like Peter, Paul and Dad. So, that was really neat, and I think he likes that song, and I hope it made him realize—in case he didn't—just how much I do think about him. I don't think of him just as my father, but also as the guy he's been, and the stuff he's done his whole life.

CMM: So, did he ever tell you if he was "more amazed at how things changed, or how they've stayed the same"?

No, he didn't. Why the hell don't I ask him?

CMM: You're said that "Addicted" is about your sister.... How did she react to it?

CW: She liked it. She's married to that guy now, which is great. They had a fairly tumultuous start—at the time I wrote that song, it was pretty early in their relationship, and I guess he wasn't as committed as she was, and she was talking to me about it, and she said to me on the phone, "I feel like I'm addicted to a real bad thing," and I just cried my eyes out writing that song, 'cause we all know that feeling, and I didn't want my sister to be feeling that.... There's a song on the next record called "Tell Him

Goodbye" which is the sequel to "Addicted." But, I'm glad that she didn't! They're a wonderful couple.

CMM: A couple of the other songs on the new album that I think are just incredible are "Sylvia Hotel" and one that was originally called "Boulder Hotel Room," but on the CD is "But the Days and Nights Are Long."

CW: Both of those songs were written in hotel rooms, which is where I write a lot of my songs. The "Days and Nights" one was written first, and, actually, it started when I was in the dressing room at a show in Boulder, and I was really sad, right in the throes of this big break-up, and was sitting there

thinking to myself, "Well, get up and get moving! Come on, Wheeler, life is short." And I stood up and I said out loud, "Yeah, but the days and nights are long." I really liked that line, and then the next morning at the hotel, it was snowing, and I just started fiddling with that.

CMM: Yeah, that's an incredible lyric. Both "Sylvia" and "Days and Nights" are great songs, but they expose such heartfelt pain. I don't know how you manage to get through them....

CW: Yeah, well, they're both about the divorce. The "Sylvia Hotel" one was when I was really hurting. Geez, I was really sad. I had stopped in Durango to visit my ex, who had moved there, and then I went up to Vancouver for a gig, and I was staying at that Sylvia Hotel, which I love. There's something really comforting about that place. I love the little bar, it's just wonderful. And there's so many changes in that song. You can see the person getting better—which was happening to me, realizing, "Yeah, this is a lonely life, but I guess it suits me well." This is my life, this is what I do. I'm fine. Just a little bit down right now because of this break-up, but things are going to be fine.

CMM: So, they are actually more hopeful than they'd appear....

CW: "Sylvia Hotel" is. "Days and Nights" is saying, look, I know there's light on some horizon, but I can't see that far ahead of me, and it's like, man, I'm sorry, I'm really down now—so screw you! "Sylvia Hotel" is saying, though, "Everything's fine tonight, here at the Sylvia Hotel." It's not that I didn't feel sad and lonely, it's just that it was okay. It's part of life. ■



Cheryl and fans Terri Clark, Karen Staley and Sylvia at the Bluebird show.

RALPH STANLEY

A Step Back in Time



Connections with the old and new brought current country stars to Clinch Mountain.

— by Geoffrey Himes —

“**T**hree groups really shaped bluegrass music,” Ricky Skaggs told me recently, “Bill Monroe and The Blue Grass Boys, The Stanley Brothers, and Flatt & Scruggs. Everyone who came after them was just following in their footsteps. Ralph Stanley and Earl Scruggs are the only surviving members of that first generation, and Earl doesn’t travel much any more. But Ralph’s still out there 150 dates a year; he’s the last of the giants still in action.”

Ralph Stanley wears every one of his 71 years in his deeply creased face, but “action” is the word for his 1998 schedule. A busy itinerary has taken the native of Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains from Tucson’s Berger Center for the Performing Arts to New York’s Carnegie Hall. And he’s getting more press than ever, thanks to a new double-CD, *Clinch Mountain Country*, on Rebel Records.

That album features Stanley and his Clinch Mountain Boys on 36 songs with 30 different guest singers, all of them enthusiastic fans of Ralph Stanley. On hand are such country stars as Skaggs, Vince Gill, Patty Loveless, Alison Krauss, George Jones, Dwight Yoakam, Joe Diffie, Diamond Rio, John Anderson and Kathy Mattea. More surprising are the contributions of such left-field acts as BR5-49, Jim Lauderdale, Junior Brown, Gillian Welch and Bob Dylan.

Of course, the presence of so much star-power is no guarantee of an enjoyable album. Many country all-star projects are practically unlistenable because the arrangements, sound and quality vary so greatly from track to track. By contrast, *Clinch Mountain Country* boasts a remarkable consistency because The Clinch Mountain Boys play all the instrumental tracks, because Bil VornDick produced the whole thing, and because Stanley’s voice casts its high, lonesome spell over every cut.

“I wanted to keep it in my style,” he explains. “I didn’t want any electric instruments or anything that sounded like modern country. I wanted my band, my sound on every song. I’ve got a reputation and a style of my own, and I wanted to keep it that way.”

There’s a lot of stubbornness in Stanley’s voice as he explains



his approach to the album, but not a hint of meanness. He talks so softly in that mountain drawl of his that you have to lean forward to get every word. But within that easy-going friendliness is a bedrock flintiness, a suggestion that some things won’t be compromised. Perhaps that combination of warm amiability and iron principle is what attracted so many big stars to the *Clinch Mountain Country* project.

When I went to interview Stanley, I felt as if I were traveling backwards in time. I drove my Honda over the Chesapeake Bay to the Eastern Shore, a part of Maryland so flat and full of tobacco farms and chicken ranches that it might as well be in the Carolinas. When I turned off the big state highway onto a little two-lane blacktop, I left all traces of the fast-food restaurants and malls and convenience stores behind. As I drove through green pastures, thick woods and big white barns, I might as well have been driving through the 1950’s.

After miles and miles of this, I came upon the American Corners Auction House, a big warehouse in the middle

of nowhere. The gravel parking lot was full of pick-up trucks and wiry farmers in clean jeans and baseball caps. The Auction House itself was a big concrete-block building, and on the concrete floor where the cattle are usually paraded for would-be buyers, rows of folding chairs faced the temporary stage.

I found Stanley sitting behind his merchandise table, cheerfully signing autographs as he sold CD’s, cassettes, bumper stickers, T-shirts, baseball caps and souvenir photos. He’s a short man with a hawk-like nose and yellow-gray hair combed straight back. I told him I was ready for the interview, and he motioned for me to sit down at the table beside him. He didn’t want to go back to the bus or the dressing room where we might talk in private; he wanted to stay right there as long as there were hands to shake and money to collect.

That said a lot right there. Stanley may be the oldest and most respected musician on the bluegrass circuit today, but that circuit has never been an easy way to make a living. It’s expensive to keep a six-piece band on the road, especially when you’re

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didn't have the bands that Bill Monroe had or Flatt & Scruggs had, but they had those simple songs about mountain ways and mountain people. But mostly they had those harmonies.

"Ralph and Carter learned to sing that sort of Sacred Harp shape-note singing in the old Baptist and Pentecostal churches," Skaggs adds, "and that can't help but influence the way you sing."

Patty Loveless used to go to the same sort of churches with her dad as a young girl. "It was im-

Clinch Mountain Country was a collaboration. Bob Dylan joined Ralph and the band and crew to help make the record. Also along were Potty Loveless and Vince Gill. Producer Bil VornDick brought it all together.

portant for me to do this project with Ralph," she says, "because I was raised on this music. I remember my father playing The Stanley Brothers and Bill Monroe on the phonograph. The first show I saw was Flatt & Scruggs at a local fair when I was five years old. When I sang 'Pretty Polly' with Ralph, I was blown away. There was so much soul in his voice that he out-sang me.

"I did the duet with Ralph," Patty adds, "because I knew it was something my dad would really appreciate if he were still alive. My father and I drifted apart when I moved to North Carolina and started singing rock 'n' roll. He still loved me, but he

playing schools, churches, fairs and auction houses. And the only way to do it is to supplement the modest performance fees with as many merchandise sales as possible.

So I sat next to Stanley at the table and asked my questions between autographs. I asked him why he had returned to the format of his 1992 record, *Saturday Night & Sunday Morning*, another two-CD set that featured Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys in collaboration with such country stars as Emmylou Harris, Bill Monroe, Tom T. Hall and Jimmy Martin. In typical fashion, his answer had more to do with economics than art.

"*Saturday Night & Sunday Morning* did real well for us," Stanley pointed out, "so I wanted to repeat it. Each of the guests has a lot of fans, and if you put their fans together with my fans and they all buy the album, well, then you've got a good product. Both the bluegrass audience and the country audience bought the first one, and I think this one'll do even better: because I have almost everyone back from the first album plus a bunch of new singers."

The most notable addition to the new album is Bob Dylan. Every year Dylan gets more than 20 invitations to contribute to tribute albums or all-star projects. In 1997, the only invitation he accepted was to sing on *Clinch Mountain Country*, and he later called it "the highlight of my career." Stanley himself took a more prosaic view.

"Dylan was supposed to record on the first one," Stanley notes, "but he was out of the country when we needed him. He had always wanted to record with me, and I had always wanted to record with him, but I had never met him until he walked through the door of the studio that day. He's got a different kind of voice, but still it works. He's well known, so I figured he'd have a lot of fans who'd want to buy the album."

Dylan and Stanley sang a duet on "The Lonesome River," which The Stanley Brothers first recorded in 1950. The title is an echo of the "high, lonesome" vocal harmonies that The Stanley Brothers practically invented. It's a sound that reflects a mountain way of life where loss and death were frequent and had to be borne with stoic dignity. It's a theme reflected in such titles as "A Lonesome Night," which Vince Gill and Patty Loveless sing on the new album; "The Darkest Hour Is Just Before the Dawn," which Dwight Yoakam sings; and "Memories of Mother," which Claire Lynch sings.

"The Stanley Brothers established the sound that we know now as the high, lonesome sound," Skaggs points out. "They



didn't approve of that. By singing with Ralph, it's like I'm patching up things with my father. He would have appreciated it."

Of all those on the album, Skaggs' history with Ralph goes way back. He—and Keith Whitley—toured with him in the early 70's, not long after Carter Stanley died. "For a 16-year-old kid," Skaggs recalls, "playing for two-and-a-half years with Ralph Stanley was the biggest thing in the world. I learned so much from him—play the melody before you start getting fancy; keep the music pure and earthy; don't try to be something you're not; make your instrument do what the vocal is saying. He's as big a hero to me as Bill Monroe. Bill's sound was more a country-bluegrass sound, but the Stanleys were more mountain, more Elizabethan. They spoke to me more, because my parents were from the mountains and they had sung The Stanley Brothers songs."

Carter Stanley wrote "Nobody's Love Like Mine" in 1954 and Skaggs often sang it with Ralph in the early 70's. Ralph and Skaggs sing it one more time on *Clinch Mountain Country*, and even at the brisk tempo their voices shadow each other as if they were long-lost brothers. For a moment, it's hard to tell what year it is; it could be 1954, 1974 or 1998.

The same is true at the American Corners Auction House out in the tobacco farms of Maryland. When Ralph Stanley III sings the lead on "All the Love I Had Is Gone," his warm tenor carries echoes of Roy Lee Centers, who wrote the song, and of Carter Stanley, who taught Centers how to sing. When Ralph Stanley Jr. comes in with that high, eerie harmony, all the old farmers in their snap-button shirts perk up in their folding chairs. The years fall away, and the men could be listening to their fathers play a Stanley Brothers 78 on the family Victrola back in 1957 or to their grandfathers play a fiddle tune on the front porch back in 1942. Some things are that timeless. ■

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Anthony "T" Graham Brown, with his boisterous, bluesy brand of country, swept across the scene in the mid- and late 1980's with hits like "Tell It Like It Used To Be," "Hell and High Water," "If You Could Only See Me Now" and "Don't Go Out" (a hit duet with Tanya Tucker). But then Brown, beset by alcohol and ego problems, seemed to fade from the country scene nearly as quickly as he'd arrived. Oh, now and then he would resurface in a taco commercial or some such thing, but for nearly a decade he was barely heard from on radio and record.

But now, with a hauntingly autobiographical hit called "Wine Into Water," a powerful song about a man who beseeches God to deliver him from a drinking problem that's slowly destroying him, "His T-ness" (as Brown is fond of calling himself) is back...and ready to answer 20 Questions.

1 Wow! After eight years without a hit, you're suddenly back on the fast track. That must feel great!

No kidding! It's awesome! Things are so miraculously better for me these days that I don't even know how to describe it. It's the most awesome change that's ever happened to me.

2 So, where the heck you been?

Well, to make a long story short, I had a really bad alcohol problem for 25 years. The last five or six years it was particularly pitiful. I sunk to a new low. I was getting up, drinking in the morning. It was just a bad scene.

3 What finally made you clean up your act?

Sheila, my wife, who's been married to me since 1980, through thick and thin, wrote me this letter on Valentine's Day, five years ago. She told me how much she loved me and how much people loved me, and how much our son, Acme, loved me. She said, "I'm afraid that if you don't back off that bottle, you're gonna wake up one day and Acme's gonna be grown up



20 Questions with T. GRAHAM BROWN

By Bob Allen

and gone, and you will have missed the whole thing." That just shook me to my soul and scared me to death! I just said a prayer that [my drinking problem] be taken away from me. And man, it's been really easy. It's been five years now, and I haven't had a craving to drink or anything. I feel guilty, almost, that's it's been so easy. Because I know it's hard for a lot of people.

4 I'm sure you've heard from a lot of those people since "Wine Into Water" hit the charts. Whew! That song's like an automatic standing ovation—if there is such a thing! It really hits a nerve with people. We worked at the Ryman recently. Alison Krauss was there, and Sawyer Brown and Michael Peterson. It was on Gary Chapman's "Sam's Place" show. I sang four songs and ended

with "Wine," and I got a two-minute standing ovation! They told me that in the four years that they've been doing that show, it was the first standing ovation anybody's got.

5 That song started breaking out as soon as it was released as a single, didn't it?

It sure did! I was as surprised as anyone, honestly. It was the Number One request in just about every market it was played in! The video got nominated by CMT as the Independent Video of the Year, and the album's gotten rave reviews. It's all been just totally out of the blue because, ya know, I'm on Intersound, a little-bitty independent label. I think it's a grassroots thing, really. It ain't about promotion men or big major-label publicity campaigns. It ain't about nothin' but people liking the song.

6 Intersound has really been doing some cool things lately. They're giving a second chance to a lot of older artists. Yeah. And oddly enough, I'll probably make more money off this album than any other record I've ever made. I've only ever gotten one royalty check in my whole life. It was last year and it was for \$115, and it was for the *Tell It Like It Used To Be* album, which came out in '86. That's it! But on my Intersound deal, I'm already in profitville. It's a great label, and one of my pet projects now is to try and get Dale Watson signed to it, too. He's a great friend of mine, and he's a great musician. I'd love to help him out and produce an album on him.

7 It's also to Intersound's credit that the label was willing to release "Wine Into Water" at all. I understand that you and Bruce Burch and Ted Hewitt co-wrote the song about five years ago. But you put it on the shelf and left it there for several years.

That's right. See, my daddy's a real hardass. Very stoic. There's a lot of alcoholism in my family, but nobody's ever talked about it, and I thought the song would make my daddy mad or embarrass my family. So I never even thought about putting it on a record.

8 *What changed your mind about recording it?*

I started doing it live at some local charity shows, and it got such a reaction I thought I should try it on the road. The first night we played "Wine Into Water" on the road, we had a big crowd, and it was wild. Everybody just stood up.

9 *So you made a demo of it, took it down to Music Row, got a deal, and the rest is history, right?*

Not exactly. (Laughs.) We did cut a demo of it. I spent my own money, and we made a damned good version of it. But I took it around to every label in town and got turned down by every one of them except George Collier at Intersound. Gary Nicholson—who's my soul brother—he and I co-produced the album, and we cut it in two days, all 11 tracks. We got Delbert McClinton and Marty Stuart and Lee Roy Parnell and Steve Wariner to sing and play on it. And Jim Horn, Beth Nielsen Chapman, Chad Cromwell, Tom Roady, Michael Rhodes, Reese Wynans, Ashley Cleveland—a whole bunch of the best musicians on the planet—on my record! And we did it all on a very limited budget. We cut this album for nothing, compared to what the big guys at the majors spend. And what happens? "Wine Into Water" ended up being the only country single in the charts released by an independent label.

10 *You made a pretty cool video, too.*

We also made the video [of "Wine Into Water"] for nothin'. And here it is nominated by CMT for Independent Video of the Year.

11 *Boy, you've sure had an unusual career, haven't you? When I first met you back in the fall of 1984, one of the first things you told me is, "I'm gonna be a star!" Of course, in Nashville you hear that all the time. But, by gosh, within a year or so you were on a major label and had a Number One record.*

Oh, I was probably full of beans. By then I was already the top demo singer on Music

Row. I had my chest poked out real big, I'm sure. But I didn't mean no harm to anybody.

12 *Actually, you were really nice, really hilarious. You were also really drunk.*

Imagine that! (Laughs.) I think back on all the times I tried to quit. I used to be drinkin' buddies with Keith Whitley. He drank himself to death, and his death didn't even faze me, as far as my drinking was concerned. Later, after I left Capitol Records, where I had a really good run, I started doing those "Run for the Border" Taco Bell commercials, and I had to fly to Hollywood every three weeks to film them. That was when things got particularly out of hand.

13 *How so? How did that make a difference?*

They catered to my every whim out there. I had a full-time limousine. I could sign for anything I wanted, and I'd wear it out! Four bottles of Dom Perignon a day. A bunch of vodka. Two or three shrimp cocktails. I'd be in an \$800 hotel room at the Four Seasons, all by myself, just f---- up as a duck, man! I was taking sleeping pills, too. There were some mornings I could have easily never woke up. It's scary to think back to all the things I did back then, and never thought twice about doing them. There's just so much I regret about those years, because I can't even remember them. I went to Hawaii and worked with Ray Charles, but I can't even remember it. Things like that are just gone.

14 *Yet those commercials gave you some big pay days, didn't they?*

Oh, I made a lot of money. Over a million dollars. But I've spent it on the road, keeping my band going. All those years without a record in the charts, we weren't making enough out there to cover expenses, so I just had to draw on my savings till it was gone. I'm broke pretty much right now. I don't have any money in the bank. My bus is paid off, and my house is paid off. I'm a workin' man—just like every-

body else. And it's fun. I'm really enjoying it more than ever right now.

15 *You did have some big hits in the 1980's, over at Capitol. Actually they were your only hits! What went off track over there?*

Garth Brooks! (Laughs.) I consider Garth a friend—nothing against him personally. But when Capitol sacrificed a couple of my singles at the altar of Garth, I knew it was time to move on. Actually I tried to get off Capitol even before Garth got there, but they renegotiated my contract, and I had the best deal in town at the time.

16 *Then along came Jimmy Bowen who took over the label and turned the world upside down.*

Bowen took over Capitol just when my first option [to renew] came up, and they were going to have to give me 900 grand to re-sign me. I would have had to cut an album out of that, but I would have still pocketed about 700 grand of it. But I told Bowen, "Look, man, I can go out and make a million dollars—I ain't worried about that. But I know you don't wanta pay me 900 grand, so why don't you just let me go?" Bowen said fine, but when it came out [in the press], the way he told it was he'd dropped me. But Bowen lied so many times to me, that that was par for the course.

17 *Then you went over to Warner Bros., where they tried to get you to wear a cowboy hat...*

Yeah. They were just wanting to cash in on the "hat act" thing, which was hot right then. But I told 'em no, that my days of wearin' a cowboy hat were over. They wanted me to cut this song called "Snake Skin Boots"—just the corniest thing! Turns out I was on Warners a couple of years, and they never released anything on me. Then I went over to CBS and more or less the same thing happened. So, for nearly four years I was hamstrung. That was hard to take.

18 *On a lighter subject, when in life did it first dawn on you that music might just be your meal ticket?*

In October 1973. That's when I got my first singing job. I was going to the University of Georgia. I'd gone to college to play baseball, but I ended up sitting on the bench the first year. Then I auditioned at a local Holiday Inn and immediately got hired for \$150 week. That was my first singing job, and I ain't never had to take another job since, even though at times it's been a roller coaster ride.

19 *As a singer, there's a strong R&B influence in everything you do. Wine Into Water really is as much a blues/R&B album as a country album. I know you played in a soul band early on. What got you into country and brought you to Nashville?*

David Allan Coe. I was watching the local PBS-TV station one night in 1975, when I was still living in Georgia. I just happened to flip on to this show about this guy riding around talking about how he'd killed people in prison. Up 'til then, I'd never heard of Coe. But he changed my life. I said, I'm gonna be that guy! I immediately broke up the band I was in and started me a country band called REO Diamond. I grew my hair long and just leapt into wretched excess. I'd show up at shows with a bottle of Wild Turkey, and when I got done, it would be done.

20 *Do things still feel like a roller coaster ride?*

Oh no! I'm just way more relaxed at this point in my life. I'm not ate up with show business anymore. I found out that fame is just an empty lie, and I don't buy into it anymore. Life is just a whole lot easier when you have that mindset. These days my whole mission is just to have a good time, and make great music. Things are so sweet right now—I couldn't ask for it to be any better. I'm just glad to be getting another go at it, and I'm not taking anything for granted this time around.

Letters

Bravo Tillis and Bane

Leave it to Michael Bane to get to the heart of the real woman that is Pam Tillis, in the November/December issue. While he gives us a glimpse of her vulnerability and reservations, he reminds us that she is constantly evolving yet remaining true to her "original intent." That's not an easy thing to do, but Pam has managed to pull it off without putting anyone off. Let's just hope that with her frenetic schedule she doesn't overdo it because there are those of us looking forward to having Pam on our radios, CD players, and TV sets for a long time to come.

Bunny Parker
New York, New York

Alan & Vince/Tops Is Tops

Country Music Magazine is tops! What a grand surprise to find Alan Jackson on the cover of the September/October issue. Loved the great feature articles and pics—also the centerfold of Vince Gill.

No one can hold a candle to these older stars! And the older, older ones are still "The Best." Please bring us more Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson and Buck Owens. Love that country.

Charlene A. Frommelt
Dubuque, Iowa

Alan 1000, CMA 0

Alan Jackson not getting even one nomination in the 1998 CMA awards was an insult. Alan is country as country can be. The guy who won Entertainer of the Year is not a country singer, and seems he gives these so-called free concerts at the right time! Alan and his wife performed a greater achievement by getting back as a family, which is great! Good luck, Alan! Love your magazine, been getting it since 1972.

Carolyn Taylor
Sardinia, Ohio

Alan Jackson & Mavericks

I just had to write and thank you for the beautiful cover of Alan Jackson in the September/October issue. It was worth waiting for. It was so great to see my favorite country artist on the cover and enjoyed the story about him, also. He has the best voice of any of the "New Country" singers today. I have been to four of his concerts over the last four years, and the last one this summer, and he is a great entertainer. I always enjoy his con-



certs. He keeps it moving and exciting. He has the best band too.

Also was glad to see the story about The Mavericks as you don't see much about them anymore, and I love their music. Great magazine. Always look forward to it.

Peggy Lanphear
Hardwick, Vermont

Holler fer Dolly and Hazel

I've long been a fan of yours...and your writings...but you really "out-did" yourself in your recent Dolly Parton feature (November/December, *Country Music*).

You captured her incredible spirit and unique story better than any writer to date. Many have tried, but all have missed the mark in my view. I'm also a Dolly fanatic. But you nailed it, Hazel. Thanks, and keep 'em coming.

Tandy Rice
Top Billing Inc.
Nashville, Tennessee

Goodbye, Roy

My favorite cowboy has always been Roy Rogers, and it was to my delight to read your story on him in the September/October issue, and what a great photo.

He has always been my hero ever since I was a boy, and still is. I have seen all of his movies and have most of his recordings, photos, books, etc. I also have several of his and Dale Evans' autographs. They are among my prized possessions.

Thank you for making my day with

your article on him. He was the greatest and an inspiration to youth.

Eugene H. Muntz
Poughkeepsie, New York

King of the Cowboys

Thanks for the nice photographs and tribute article to the King of the Cowboys, Roy Rogers, in your September/October issue. He was a great entertainer in music, movies and TV. He was a man of good, decent morals who cared about people and wanted to be just Roy.

We had the great pleasure of meeting him on three occasions the past few years at his museum in Victorville. He made you feel like friends, not just fans.

His memory will always be with those who were fortunate to have had the opportunity to remember him for all the things he represented. A true legend.

Jean S. Reedy
Harrisonburg, Virginia

20 Questions with Ricky Skaggs

Does Ricky Skaggs still go on the road for shows? About eight years ago he and his Hwy 40 Blues passed me on the freeway in McAllen, Texas, and he waved at me. I sure would like to meet him or see one of his shows. I am a winter Texan, and I have five of his cassettes and tape him off the radio every time I hear him. Love his voice and music. I don't know too much about bluegrass except I like it when he or Bill Monroe sang "Uncle Pen" or "Muleskinner Blues." Love your magazine, and I have been a member for about ten or 15 years. Good story on Alan Jackson too.

Rusty Hoffman
Donna, Texas

Mavericks on That Trampoline

I liked your article on The Mavericks in the September/October issue. Raul Malo is one of the most talented artists in the business, but he doesn't get nearly the recognition he deserves. He not only has a beautiful voice and plays many different instruments, but he writes and produces their songs, as well as leads and orchestrates the band.

I love this band and their sound. That's why I have to inform you and fellow readers that their album is entitled *Trampoline*, not *Masquerade*, as was stated.

Kathy Beaver
Connersville, Indiana
Title was changed in production.—Ed.

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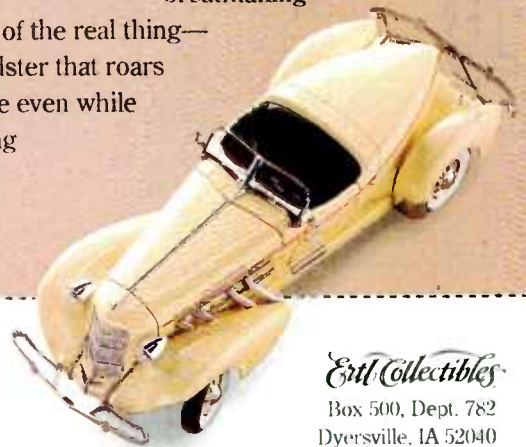
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QUIZ

Answers to these questions can be found by reading this issue of *Country Music Magazine*. Answers will be published in the March/April 1999 issue.

1. Steve Wariner got his start playing in the band of which country legend?
2. What was Lee Ann Womack's first Top Ten hit?
3. How many albums has Kenny Chesney released?
4. Which Cheryl Wheeler song was a Number One hit for Dan Seals?
5. What's the name of Ralph Stanley's latest, all-star album?
6. Which magazine named Chevy's new Silverado full-size pickup as Truck of the Year?

ANSWERS TO LAST ISSUE'S QUIZ:

1. "All of The Good Ones Are Gone" 2. Buck Owens 3. Her cousin's home studio 4. Two 5. National Guard 6. Chevy's new full-size pick-up is the Silverado.

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Mavs Fans Happy

It was a happy, happy day when I saw The Mavericks on your September/October issue. We got the CMM just seeing their *name*; I don't know what we would have done if their picture had been on it: maybe frame it and hang it on the wall like we do all Mavericks pictures and Dwight Yoakam.

Been in their fan club three years. My mom was born in 1901; she would say, "Every Old Crow thinks theirs is the Blackest"! But that Raul can sing just like on tape. No recording equipment, nothing, just sat and jammed at our family parties. Nick Kane and the band are just as good. At the Havana 98 Party, Nick and Paul visited with us *before* the party. Makes us 60-year-olds feel like they're all our boys!

Nashville/radio/CMT do not give them a break. But Nashville did not for Elvis, or Roy Orbison. So Raul, Nick and the band are in a good class!

P.S. Went back to the market to buy my bro one, and CMM was all sold out. The girl said she did not know it was so hard to find Mavericks in magazines. Well, it is. Thank you again.

Linda Pressy
McLeansboro, Illinois

Vince's Eyes

How could you possibly put a centerfold of the stupendous Vince Gill in your magazine (September/October issue) and place sunglasses on the most beautiful pair of eyes that God ever created? Those eyes sing personally to each individual in a crowd of a million....

So very disgusted, as are all my friends. *The Key* is my lifeline when things are really bad. Best to you ever, Vince.

Barbara A. Norton
Coldwater, Michigan

Thanks for Vince

Thanks so much for the pull-out poster of Vince Gill (September/October issue). He has the nicest voice of any singer I've heard since Gene Watson. Do you know what ever happened to a singer named Carl Smith? He had an album out years ago called *The Carl Smith Touch*. It was so good that I've never forgotten it.

Like Barbara Mandrell, I was country when country wasn't cool. I've loved country music my whole life. I really enjoy *Country Music Magazine*. Keep up the good work.

Barbara Manning
Bakersfield, California

Music Yes, Fireworks No

Hurray for Patrick Carr and his Final Note in the November/December magazine. As a longtime subscriber (who is paid up to 2005), I have not always agreed with him, but this time I certainly did. If singers must set off fireworks, they don't

have much else to offer. A good voice and a good country song is enough fireworks for me. Vince Gill and his great voice is enough, and also Trace Adkins, especially in "The Rest of Mine."

Sara E. Janes
Cameron, West Virginia

See Shania in Twin Cities

This letter is regarding the Final Note in the November/December 1998 issue. Patrick Carr says how disappointed he was with Shania Twain's concert. The picture shows her in Nashville; is this the concert he went to? I recently saw Shania in concert in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and she was absolutely awesome. Maybe he should've come here to see her. This was the best concert I have seen in years. I have seen LeAnn Rimes/Bryan White, The George Strait Festival of Music, and Brooks & Dunn and Reba. Out of all these concerts, Shania was the best.

Thanks for the awesome pull-out poster of John Michael Montgomery.

Jackie K. Hatcher
Rockford, Minnesota

Fan Agrees with Patrick

I've enjoyed your articles, and I agree with you. I'm 67 years old, a female that has strummed guitar and sung country and gospel songs for over 50 years. Your article, "Crowd Control," in the November/December issue describes my feelings. I've had my cable taken out because TNN and CMT have nothing for me.

I'm an old-timer fan; Roger Miller, Faron Young, Hank Williams, Snow, etc., but that's history and so am I. I belong to a local country show and still enjoy it, but country music as I know it has gone back to the amateurs.

Thanks for a great column. You have a right to complain. I'm sure many agree with you. Keep up the good work.

Lothell Dubose
Devine, Texas

More Crowd Control

Thank you for an honest, appraised article, "Crowd Control," on Shania-Garth in the November/December Final Note.

I attended Garth here at the Arena in Albany, New York. It was more like a revival meeting, 17,000 praising Garth—*hand waving*. Give me a Vince Gill concert or Deana Carter where I can hear the guitar (acoustic), pretty sounds, and songs with feeling. That's why I watch *Grand Ole Opry*: even newcomers keep it country. This past week heard Connie Smith's/Marty Stuart's new album.

Walter Herold
Saratoga Springs, New York

Final Note

Editor-at-Large Patrick Carr always gets his feelings across. And I can only agree with him 100%.

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by Kelly RuBert

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Grand production musical numbers can only cover up on the shortcomings—overlay a not-so-grand singer. I'm looking forward to a Kate & Anna McGarrigle hour or video with Emmylou Harris and Linda Ronstadt.

Dreams do come true. These folk ladies can really sing. A new *Trio II* CD? This has been a great year for music.

The Derailers *Reverb Deluxe* CD picks up where The Flying Burrito Bros. left off. Isn't there a Gram Parsons tribute CD cover coming out? Produced on selections by Emmylou Harris? Still waitin' for *The Ballad of Sally Rose* to come out on CD.

P.S. LeAnn Rimes has more country soul than Trisha and Garth put together!

Sandra K. Lewis
Omaha, Nebraska

More Jett Williams

In your November/December issue you said Hank Jr. and Jett Williams were featured in the People section. I wouldn't call having their names and a picture much of a feature. I would like to see a real article written about Jett Williams.

I have her book, *Ain't Nothin' as Sweet as My Baby*. I also saw her live at the Wisconsin Opry July 31, 1994. She was with members of her dad's band. A very good show. I would like to see an update printed about her.

Ilene Struve
Plymouth, Wisconsin

Willie's Channel

I want to thank Hazel Smith for publishing the phone number to Willie Nelson's "The Outlaw Music Channel" in the July/August issue. I called and subscribed and haven't had to turn my radio on since! To anyone who has satellite or cable and loves *The Journal*, this channel is a must. It's pure country from way back. I see a young Loretta Lynn, Porter Wagoner, The Wilburn Brothers and so many, many more. I love it. And Willie, if you read this, please try to find the *Ozark Jubilee* tapes and put them on your channel. Thank you.

How old are Junior Brown and Jim Ed Brown, and are they related? Please have a feature on Big Al Downing and his albums.

Ruth Roberson
Cumming, Georgia
The two Browns are not related.—Ed.

Allison Moorer Yes/Shania Yes

Regarding the record review by Bob Allen re: Allison Moorer's *Alabama Song* in the November/December issue, I agree with him wholeheartedly. I saw Allison when she opened for Hal Ketchum (my favorite male singer) in Northampton, Massachusetts. Allison is a tremendous singer/songwriter as well as her sister Shelby Lynne.

I encourage anyone who likes true country music with a superb voice and

great songs to buy this album. "Soft Place to Fall" ranks up there with the classic "He Stopped Loving Her Today." In his review Bob Allen didn't mention the first cut, "Pardon Me," which is also a beautiful song!

On another note, I disagree with Patrick Carr's diatribe re: Shania Twain in *Final Note* in the same issue. I saw her concert two days in a row, and his opinion is in the minority. Shania is electrifying, and her concert is one of the best I've seen, and I've been going to concerts for 40 years. Shania is a beautiful, talented and energetic entertainer; besides, what's wrong with salesmanship? I also like concerts by Randy Travis and Reba, who are great in their presentation too.

Come on, Patrick, give Shania her due.
J. Garbin

West Springfield, Massachusetts

Thanks for Alan

Just want to say a "Special Thanks" for the great Alan Jackson record review in the November/December issue. "Little Man" is really exceptional—very well written. Alan has *always* been Number One in my book! He is "Country Music."

Keep up the great work!

Margie Davis
Memphis, Tennessee

One Fan's Must-Haves

I always make it a point to read the Record Reviews in each new issue of CMM, but there usually isn't much for me to jump up and down about. But lately I have such a long "hafta have" list that I can't keep up! Four or so in your past reviews have already become favorites. Dwight Yoakam's *A Long Way Home*, George Jones' *It Don't Get Any Better Than This*, BR5-49's *Big Backyard Beat Show*, and *Tribute to Tradition* (had to have Marty's new/old sounding "Same Old Train"). *The Horse Whisperer* soundtrack was also worth buying. Loved the movie and the illustrated companion. *Thank you, Robert Redford!* My "hafta have" list keeps growing—Waylon's new one, Dolly's *Hungry Again*, Connie Smith's first one in 20 years, Travis Tritt's....guess it'll be awhile before I'm caught up, but that's the way I like it!

Roxanne Johnston
Hibbing, Minnesota

Knoxville Plays Young & Old

In Knoxville, Tennessee, we have a new radio station that plays both older country music, as well as the new.

Now fans are hearing: Hank Jr., Dolly, George Jones, Conway Twitty, etc., and we love it! (By listening I won tickets and saw Lyle Lovett.) The name is WQIX (KIX) 104.5 FM. I love country music, especially Dolly and Hank Jr.

Brenda Edmundson
Knoxville, Tennessee

Supports LeAnn

I have been a member of LeAnn Rimes' fan club since her album *Blue* went on sale. I think LeAnn is one of the most versatile artists of today, and I try to read everything about her. I also listen to her music every day.

I had the pleasure of meeting her this year, and found her to be a very sincere young lady, who is appreciative of her legion of fans of all ages.

I believe she has earned the right to sing the songs and wear the outfits that she likes.
Marion N. Chauncey
Brunswick, Georgia

Counting Heads

After listening to the *Billboard* Top 40, I sat down and listed the artists I feel are really country through and through. I am 62 years of age and have been a country fan as long as I could turn the radio on and set the dial.

Who out there agrees with me—Alan Jackson, Brooks & Dunn, Lee Ann Womack, Terri Clark, George Strait, Alabama, Clay Walker, Wade Hayes, Aaron Tippin, Tim McGraw, Randy Travis, John Michael Montgomery, Travis Tritt, Reba McEntire, Vince Gill, Michael Peterson, Kenny Chesney, Billy Ray Cyrus. Eighteen out of 40—could too many country DJ's be old pop/rock fans or what?

Jackie M. Lellar
Ada, Oklahoma

P.S. Country music does not need any other type of music to give it class. It stands alone.

Mom & Country

This feels like one of the hokeyest things I have ever done, but somehow it also feels right.

I'm at my grandmother's furnished but empty house waiting on the last load of my mother's furniture. My mother had a subscription to your magazine, and I've just finished the July/August issue.

Mama died May 31, and I've lost others since then. Placing Granny in a nursing home and selling Mama's house was almost more than I can take.

Your magazine helped. I grew up on Lester & Earl, Tennessee Ernie, Porter, Dolly, Loretta, Tammy and so many more. I watched the Saturday evening shows some of them had, and all of their appearances on *Hee Haw*.

I'm 43 now. You can do the math to figure out when I jumped into rock music head first. Eventually, I learned to appreciate music for the sake of music. My tastes are very eclectic.

What does this have to do with your magazine? This issue was filled with talk of the "great ones" who are gone. I thought of how my mother had used music of the great ones for any occasion or expression of emotion. She showed me

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how country singers and writers were able to reflect any message with their music, words and tones. You knew she was very moved when she said a song made "your blood run cold." Because she taught me such love for the gifts of country music, I will always consider Elizabeth "Betty" Burdette one of the "Great Ones." Thank you.

Donna B. Welch
Abbeville, South Carolina

Suggestion Box

We often hear about today's country superstars like George Strait, Alan Jackson, Vince Gill, etc., paying homage to their heroes (Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, George Jones, etc.). We also hear about the generosity of these superstars—their significant donations of time and money to various charities. Why not apply some of the generosity of the ailing state of country music?

There's something sick about not being able to hear any new material by the likes of Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon, Jones, etc., on today's country radio—particularly as these artists have been creating some of the best music of their careers these past few years. It would also be a nice change to hear some of the younger great artists (who dare to twang) that can't get on the airwaves either!

Why don't some of the superstars get together and start/buy a "non-profit" radio station? Great country music can help to heal the mind and soul. Who's going to help to heal the current state of country music?

Violet Frazer
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

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- 48 Computer-Assisted Bookkeeping
- 07 High School
- 59 Catering/Gourmet Cooking
- 57 Home Health Aide*
- 23 Medical Office Assistant
- 19 Bartender
- 04 Auto Repair Technician
- 08 Legal Assistant
- 03 Child Day Care Management
- 05 Hotel/Restaurant Management
- 85 Drafting
- 54 AutoCAD*
- 47 Animal Care Specialist
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- 35 Travel Agent
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- 13 Professional Secretary
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*Certificate Programs

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- 12 Interior Decorator
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- 09 Legal Secretary
- 381 Medical Insurance Clerk
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- 25 Gunsmith
- 40 Photographer
- 76 Freelance Writer
- 42 Dre-smaking and Design
- 30 Floral Design
- 26 Teacher Aide
- 15 Home Inspector
- 39 Medical Transcriptionist
- 31 Professional Locksmithing
- 58 Private Investigator
- 102 Professional Landscaper
- 149 Jewelry Repair Technician
- 89 Small Engine Repair
- 96 Tax Preparer
- 151 Plumber
- 152 Mason
- 158 Auto Body Repair Tech.
- 148 Drywall Installer & Finisher
- 105 Computer Graphic Artist
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- 01 Programming in BASIC
- 37 Visual Basic
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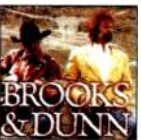
Tribute To Tradition
Dixie Chicks, Martina
McBride, more.
(Columbia)
259564



Lee Ann Wamack
Some Things I Know
(Decca)
259549



Collin Raye
The Walls Came Down
(Epic)
253641



Brooks & Dunn
If You See Her
(Arista)
247759



Steve Wariner
Burnin' The Roadhouse
Down (Capitol)
241331



Mark Wills
Wish You Were Here
(Mercury)
245571



Gary Allan
It Would Be You
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Deana Carter
Did I Shave My
Legs For This?
(Capitol)
166397



Patsy Cline's
Greatest Hits
(MCA)
365924

Joe Diffie—Third Rock From The Sun (Epic)
David Lee Murphy—Out With A Bang (MCA)
David Ball—Thinkin' Problem (Warner Bros.)
The Tractors (Arista)
Chris LeDoux—Best Of (Capitol)
Alan Jackson—Who I Am (Arista)
Billy Dean—Greatest Hits (Capitol)
Faith Hill—Take Me As I Am (Warner Bros.)
Vince Gill—When Love Finds You (MCA)
Sammy Kershaw—Feel'n' Good Train (Mercury)
Tracy Byrd—No Ordinary Man (MCA)
Reba McEntire—Read My Mind (MCA)
Randy Travis—This Is Me (Warner Bros.)
Eddie Rabbit—All Time Greatest Hits (Warner Bros.)
Charlie Daniels—Super Hits (Epic)
Suzy Bogguss—Greatest Hits (Capitol)
Jeff Foxworthy—You Might Be A Redneck If... (Warner Bros.)
Rhythm, Country & Blues—Vince Gill, Reba McEntire,
Travis Tritt, more. (MCA)
Mavericks—What A Crying Shame (MCA)
Rodney Crowell—Diamonds And Dirt (Columbia)
Blackhawk (Arista)
John Michael Montgomery—Kickin' It Up (Atlantic)
Canway Twitty—20 Greatest Hits (MCA)
Common Thread: Songs Of The Eagles—Clint Black,
Trisha Yearwood, Alan Jackson, more. (Giant)
Dolly Parton/Tammy Wynette/Loretta Lynn—
Honky Tonk Angels (Columbia)

489260 Reba McEntire—Greatest Hits Volume Two (MCA)
488916 Dolly Parton/Linda Ronstadt/Emmylou Harris—Trio
(Warner Bros.)
487066 George Strait—Easy Come, Easy Go (MCA)
488551 George Strait—Anniversary: 20 Years Of Hits (Epic)
476044 Tammy Wynette—Final Touches (MCA)
486233 Canway Twitty—It Won't Be The Last (Mercury)
476036 Tanya Tucker—Greatest Hits '90-'92 (Capitol)
473728 Patty Loveless—Greatest Hits (MCA)
486308 Shania Twain (Mercury)
485730 Willie Nelson—Teatro (Island) ★
484758 Dwight Yoakam—This Time (Reprise)
479717 Heather Myles—Haunted Heart (Mercury)
477463 Sammy Kershaw—Only What I Feel (Epic)
477133 John Michael Montgomery—Life's A Dance (Atlantic)
456608 Allan Moore—Alabama Song (MCA)
476051 Reba McEntire—It's Your Call (MCA)
474833 The Essential Bill Monroe & His Bluegrass Boys
(1945-1949) (Columbia/Legacy) ★ ■
474536 "Pure Country"—George Strait, more. (MCA)
474403 Randy Travis—Greatest Hits Volume 2 (Warner Bros.)
366211 Vince Gill—I Still Believe In You (MCA)
473397 Randy Travis—Greatest #1 Hits (Warner Bros.)
473157 Kenny Rogers—20 Greatest Hits (Reprise)
470955 Alan Jackson—A Lot About Livin' (Arista)
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467712 Billy Ray Cyrus—Some Gave All (Mercury)
Mary Chapin Carpenter—Come On, Come On (Columbia)
440560

467316 George Jones—16 Biggest Hits (Epic/Legacy) 253674
352633 The Oak Ridge Boys—Collection 1 (MCA) 440412
467308 Bob Wills—Country Music Hall Of Fame (MCA) 440354
352427 Shenandoah—Greatest Hits (Columbia) 436808
466607 Mark Nesler—I'm Just That Way (Asylum) 250944
463240 Wynanna Judd—Wynonna (MCA/Curb) 435909
458935 Sawyer Brown—The Dirt Road (Curb) 433656
458349 The Brenda Lee Story (MCA) 432757
458273 George Strait—Ten Strait Hits (MCA) 432617
259614 The Freddy Fender Collection (Reprise) 430934
456913 Reba McEntire—For My Broken Heart (MCA) 430090
456541 Heather Myles—Highways And Honky-Tonks (Rouner) ★ 250761
454637 Brooks & Dunn—Brand New Man (Arista) 429969
453746 Jerry Jeff Walker—Brand New Man (Arista) 428664
259531 Keith Harling—Write It In Stone (MCA) 245506
450361 Steve Wariner—Greatest Hits Volume 2 (MCA) 426957
449587 Trisha Yearwood (MCA) 426148
448753 Kathy Mattea—A Collection Of Hits (Mercury) 424622
448662 The Statler Brothers—Greatest Hits (Mercury) 425108
448571 Hank Williams, Sr.—40 Greatest Hits (Polydor) ■ 423863
256685 Alan Jackson—Don't Rock The Jukebox (Arista) 420935
444885 Kitty Wells—The Country Music Hall Of Fame (MCA) 416370
447458 Ernest Tubb—The Country Music Hall Of Fame (MCA) 416354
444042 Loretta Lynn—The Country Music Hall Of Fame (MCA) 416339
441451 Highway 101—Greatest Hits (Warner Bros.) 413633
440560 Reba McEntire—Rumor Has It (MCA) 238410
41538

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Alabama
Dancin' On The Boulevard
[RCA]
187153



Martina McBride
Evolution
[RCA]
220236



Alan Jackson
Everything I Love
[Arista]
235002



Dixie Chicks
Wide Open Spaces
[Monument]
234757



Faith Hill
Faith
[Warner Bros.]
241356



Garth Brooks
Sevens
[Capitol]
232207



Alison Krauss & Union Station
So Long So Wrong
[Rounder] 188524

ALABAMA

Alabama—In Pictures [RCA]	137018
Alabama—Greatest Hits, Vol. 3 [RCA]	123513
Alabama—Cheap Seats [RCA]	123505
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Alabama—Greatest Hits [RCA]	123471
Alabama—Roll On [RCA]	123448
Alabama—Mountain Music [RCA]	123430

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The Derailers—Reverb Deluxe [Sire/Watermelon] *	235531
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Vern Gosdin—Chisled In Stone [Columbia]	365155
Steve Wariner—Greatest Hits [MCA]	361576
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John Michael Montgomery—Greatest Hits [Atlantic]	225862
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The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band—Twenty Years Of Dirt The Best Of... [Warner Bros.]	345744
Chely Wright—Let Me In [MCA]	221457
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Barbara Mandrell Greatest Hits [MCA]	335653
Lee Greenwood Greatest Hits [MCA]	335109
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David Allan Coe—For The Record: The First 10 Years [Columbia]	329813
Kenny Chesney—I Will Stand [BNA Records]	221267
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Willie Nelson—Stardust [Columbia]	283887
The Best Of Don Williams, Vol. II [MCA]	295139
Merle Haggard—16 Biggest Hits [Epic/Legacy]	253666
Johnny Cash & Willie Nelson—VH1 Storytellers [American/Columbia]	250266
Ty Herndon—Big Hopes [Epic]	246264
Joe Ely—Twistin' In The Wind [MCA] *	245555
Jeff Foxworthy—Totally Committed [Warner Bros.]	245498
Illrd Time Out—Live At The Mac [Rounder] *	242362
Lila McCann—Lila [Asylum]	213611
Strength In Numbers—Telluride Sessions [MCA]	240788
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Lonestar—Crazy Nights [BNA Records]	214676
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	164632



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Songbook
A Collection Of Hits
[MCA] 219436



Neal McCoy
Greatest Hits
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188631



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253245



Patty Loveless
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Lonesome [Epic]
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Kentucky Headhunters—Still Pickin' [Mercury]	103358
Alison Krauss & The Cox Family—I Know Who Holds Tomorrow [Rounder]	100800

POP/ROCK

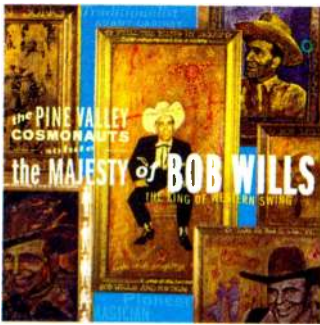
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Essential Collector by Rich Kienzle

■ Recordings ■

It's 1999, and we might as well sweep up some of 1998's small-label releases, post-70's reissues, tributes and packages for a change, some great, others... well, read on.

Pine Valley Cosmonauts: Five years ago, Asleep at the Wheel joined with a number of stars to salute Bob Wills in an acclaimed tribute album. One se-



lection from that album—the instrumental “Red Wing”—won a Grammy. While I thought they did a fine job at the time, I find myself equally drawn to *The Pine Valley Cosmonauts Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills* (Bloodshot BS 029). Aside from Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Robbie Fulks, this loosely organized group of artists (who previously did an album-length salute to Johnny Cash) are known mainly to the so-called alt.country audience. Their approach to Wills differs from the smoother, more mainstream approach of Ray Benson and friends. This music is rougher, edgier, and in the end far more spontaneous and exciting, at times reflecting the wild, swooping fury of Wills and The Playboys, minus any doomed-to-fail attempts to studiously recreate the old records.

The sheer variety of approaches is the key to the album's success. None of the performers are governed by the conventional arrangements of these songs, just the melodies. From there they redefine each number in their own way. Chris Mills' barn-

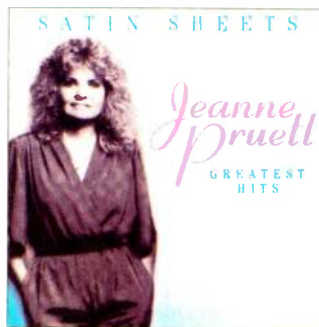
burning, ebullient “Home in San Antonio” is rivaled by Gilmore's tart vocal on “Trouble in Mind” or Kelly Hogan's smoky “Drunkard's Blues.” Jon Langford, who organized the project, contributes a breathless “Sweet Kind of Love” that owes nothing to Tommy Duncan. The same goes for the sharp duet between Neko Case and Bob Boyd on “Stay a Little Longer.” Sally Timms gives “Right or Wrong” a sultry approach far from either Wills or George Strait's hit version. Steel guitarist Mark Durante's work on “Texas Playboy Rag,” “Steel Guitar Rag” and “Pan Handle Rag” (actually a Leon McAuliffe solo hit) speak well for his talents. Throughout the album, mandolins, horns and fiddles are as loose and romping as Wills' own, yet the textures and cues are totally different. That spontaneity, combined with vigor and audacity, make this album a resounding success even though it won't win any Grammys.

Tommy Overstreet: The 1970's were Tommy Overstreet's time. He may not have been that era's biggest star, yet—particularly in the years before the Outlaw era—Overstreet developed a following that lasted most of the decade. It's to Varese Sarabande's credit that they alone have chosen to delve into the second-string artists of the pre-Outlaw 1970's, which in the last 30 years has been one of the most ignored eras of the music. *The Best of Tommy Overstreet* (VSD 5968) brings together his 16 biggest hits from ABC and Dot Records covering the years 1971-1978.

The selections, arranged chronologically, begin with his three “parenthesis” hits: “Gwen (Congratulations)” and “I Don't Know You (Anymore)” from 1971, and “Ann (Don't Go Runnin'”) from 1972. Overstreet flew through that era with “A Seed Before the Rose,” “Heaven Is My

Woman's Love” (1972), “Send Me No Roses,” “I'll Never Break These Chains” (1973), “(Jeanne Marie) You Were a Lady,” “If I Miss You Again Tonight,” “I'm a Believer” (1974), “That's When My Woman Begins” (1975), “Here Comes That Girl Again,” “If Love Was a Bottle of Wine” (1976) and “Don't Go City Girl On Me” (1977), as well as “Yes Ma'am” and “Fadin' In, Fadin' Out” from 1978. Though Overstreet had charted singles beyond that era, his time had clearly passed. The set, assembled with his cooperation, includes very brief notes by compiler Larry Zwisohn.

Jeanne Pruett: Another artist long ignored by reissuers is Jeanne Pruett. The wife of longtime Marty Robbins sideman Jack Pruett, she remains an Opry member to this day. Though she'd written songs for Robbins' publishing company for years and unsuccessfully recorded for RCA, only when Robbins brought her demo tape to Owen Bradley at Decca did she find a true supporter. Even so, out of her 24 charted solo singles, only four went Top Ten, the best known being “Satin Sheets,” which stayed at Number One



for three weeks in 1973. Varese's 16-track *Jeanne Pruett: Greatest Hits* (VSD 5967) begins with her first chart hit for Decca, the very minor 1971 single, “Hold On to My Unchanging Love,” a Pruett original, followed by another: “Love Me.” A Top 40 hit for her in 1972, a year later it became an even bigger

Marty Robbins single.

The lonesome, bluesy sound of “Satin Sheets,” enhanced by Grady Martin's low-string guitar work, scored well enough, though her subsequent hits—among them “You Don't Need to Move a Mountain,” “Welcome to the Sunshine,” “Sweet Baby Jane,” “Just Like Your Daddy,” “Honey on His Hands” and others—weren't nearly as successful. It would be late 1979 when Pruett, now departed from MCA, moved to tiny IBC Records, where Walter Haynes, her former MCA producer, had relocated. There, before the label folded, she landed three Top Tens in a row: “Back to Back,” “Temporarily Yours” and “It's Too Late.” Her final significant recordings were duets with Robbins made not long before he died in 1982. One, a duet of “Love Me,” is included on this set, along with the previously unissued “Walking Piece of Heaven.”

The Fly-Rite Boys: One winner that never made our reviews section was *Big Sandy Presents the Fly-Rite Boys* (HighTone HCD 8090), a largely instrumental collection featuring the unit sans its frontman. They've overcome past musical drawbacks here, with their longstanding love of vintage California country and Western swing blossoming into dazzling music. Guitarist Ashley Kingman and steel player Lee Jeffriess continue the Jimmy Bryant-Speedy West tradition, but do it their own way. Clever, flawless country-jazz excursions, such as “Laguna Sunset,” “Flyin' Rite” and “Straight-8 Boogie” reflect that growth. Kingman's mature country-jazz dominates “Mary's Mood,” equaled by “Laguna Sunset,” which recalls early 50's Chet Atkins. Jeffriess, too, has matured, as reflected on the melancholy, introspective “Rhapsody in Violet.”

No less admirable is the band's musical catalyst: its newest member, muscular Brit pianist Carl “Sonny” Leyland.

He proves himself a powerful boogie-woogie master on "Straight-8 Boogie" and "D of L Boogie," and is able to shift to 1940's bebop on "Wizard's Dust." Leyland's spirited vocals on the 1930's swing oldie, "Rosetta," and the original "Booze Party" have personality to burn, pushed along by the



rhythm section, bassist Wally Hersom and drummer Bobby Trimble. Mixing the swing styles of Bob Wills and Count Basie, the final track, "Minor Struggle," brings together all their strengths and whets one's appetite for their next album reunited with Sandy.

Tammy Tribute: *Tammy Wynette Remembered* (Asylum 62277) was produced by the most capable of hands: Asylum-Nashville head Evelyn Shriver and Tammy's husband, veteran Nashville producer George Richey, who pulled the stops out to do this one right with a wide scope of performers. Nearly every performance here would bring a smile to Tammy. Trisha Yearwood's exquisite "Til I Get It Right" is true to both her own music and to the spirit of Tammy's own recording. Rosanne Cash doesn't shrink from "D-I-V-O-R-C-E," and Melissa Etheridge's smoldering "Apartment #9" is first rate. It's not surprising that George Jones runs away with "Take Me to Your World" or that K.T. Oslin's take on "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad" gives the song a sly, ballsy edge. Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt and Kate and Anna McGarrigle acquit themselves well on the old George-Tammy duet, "Golden Ring." On "I Don't Wanna Play House," Sara Evans reverts back to the traditional side reflected on her first album.

Two performances seem debatable. Elton John's pompous, bombastic "Stand By Your Man," though sung from the heart, is so over the edge it's tough to see how it fits. Nor am I certain it was wise to end the album with the Beach Boys' tune, "In My Room," Tammy's frail-sounding duet with Brian Wilson. While it's a judgment call whether to include any artist on their own tribute, I can't help thinking that an unreleased performance featuring Tammy at her peak might have ended this otherwise excellent record on a less depressing note.

Tribute to Tradition: Sony Nashville's much-hyped *Tribute to Tradition* (Columbia CK 68073) is designed to unite the younger generation with songs from past decades. The results are mixed. Randy Travis' sparkling take on Merle Haggard's "Mama Tried" reflects his stylistic debt to Hag. Rick Trevino's searing reprise of Ray Price's "City Lights" is the sleeper of the record. Loretta Lynn's "Wine, Women and Song" is putty in the hands of Patty Loveless. Both Martina McBride's worthy reprise of Tammy's "Til I Can Make It on My Own" and Alison Krauss' performance of The Browns' "The Three Bells" are magnificent. And The Dixie Chicks' shuffle version of "Stand By Your Man" sure beats Elton John's.

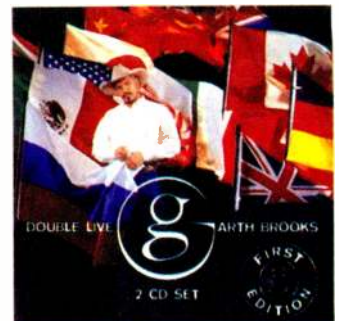
Nearly as many performances stumble from note one, however, among them Trace

Adkins' clumsy spin on Lefty's "I Never Go Around Mirrors." Mary-Chapin Carpenter's stab at "Oh Lonesome Me" rings false, while Joe Diffie's wooden rendition of "Behind Closed Doors" is even worse than Wade Hayes' off-base "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)" and Collin Raye's anemic "Cold Cold Heart." As for the Joe Diffie-Collin Raye "Honky Tonk Heroes," no comment, except that this song hardly seems "traditional." Plus, shoehorning Doug Stone in to sing a newer song makes no sense at all.

What's infuriating is the patronizing pretense behind this project. Face it. If Music Row producers truly cared about preserving tradition, they'd preserve it in the newer music even as they move ahead, instead of acting as if the past never existed. Nor is it fun seeing a historian of Robert K. Oermann's stature trying to justify this concept in gushy, silly notes that are nothing more than indiscriminate Music Row cheerleading. The final page of the book includes a huge, pretentious blurb stating, "Once again, the torch has been passed." If this album doesn't prove someone dropped it, nothing will.

Garth Brooks: Speaking of torches and smoke, 1998's end brought unparalleled hype surrounding Garth's latest stunt—oops, album, *Double Live* (Capitol-Nashville 97424), a double greatest hits package with three new songs included.

This album has been released with six different covers (including one of him smashing his guitar—artistry in action), printed in "limited editions" of a million copies each. The staggering arrogance motivating this project hardly surprises me: Let's not forget Garth's year of unending events, all of which seem to reflect a belief that shattering sales records counts far more than musical excellence. Plus, there was his "take over" of Capitol-Nashville, now in the hands of "his" people, and his constant manipulation of the media, with discussions of retirement, etc., that got old long ago.



So what of the music? Well, I like "Two of a Kind, Workin' on a Full House," but the "hits" differ little from the studio versions except for crowd noise and some overdubs that undermine the live feel. In the end, it reaffirms one truth: Garth Brooks will not go down in history for his music but for the marketing and media orchestration that helped achieve those sales records. There's little virtuosity in cowboying up the 70's and 80's pop music of Dan Fogelberg, Kiss and Billy Joel, while superficially invoking true country talents like George Strait on silly throwaways like "Long Neck Bottle." Otherwise, listening to *Double Live* brought to mind a classic film made before Garth was born. *A Face in the Crowd* starred Andy Griffith as a drifter who lucks into radio and TV to become a Garth-like national icon convinced of his vast power over the masses—until one too many missteps alienate those very masses. You might want to rent it, Garth. It might give you another revelation or two.

How to Get These Collectibles

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Keepin' Track of '98

Well, well. What a year. Blow me down. I just measured my stack of keeper CD's from '98, and you know what? It's a foot and a half high! If it ever toppled on the gerbil, lights out!

That's news—domestic rodents hereabouts have been in no danger for years, even decades—and among other things, it means that there's no room for the usual end-of-year caustic comments. So let's just mention that as in the past, country's recent decline in profitability seems to have been good for its creativity, and move on lickety-split to the good stuff.

We'll start with the heavies. George Jones (*It Don't Get Any Better Than This*, MCAD-70005), Waylon Jennings (*Closing In on the Fire*, ARK 21 10023), Willie Nelson (*Teatro*, Island 314 524 548), and Dolly Parton (*Hungry Again*, Decca DRND-70041) all did themselves proud in '98, both George and Dolly making their most classically styled albums in ages (George with Norro Wilson producing) and Willie making his most adventurous with Daniel Lanois. Also, Waylon's wonderful *Dreaming My Dreams*, from 1975, was re-released on CD for the first time by Koch International (DZS-161).

Still slap-bang in the center of unhyphenated country, we had Lee Ann Womack confirming her stellar taste with *Some Things I Know* (Decca DRND-70040), Connie Smith reappearing at last with *Connie Smith* (Warner Bros. 47033) and those little miracles of country modernity, The Dixie Chicks, laying *Wide Open Spaces* (Monument NK68195). Brooks & Dunn did okay, too, I thought, and the return of Don Williams was pleasant, but I wouldn't actually recommend either album.

The great Southwest was as fruitful as usual and then some, Austin and its neighbors producing Dale Watson & His Lone Stars' *The Truckin' Sessions* (Koch KOC CD 8018), the Cornell Hurd Band's *Texas Fruit Shack* (Behemoth 1007), Justin Trevino's *Texas Honkytonk* (Neon Nightmare 1001), Shaver's *Victory* (New West NW 6003), Junior Brown's *Long Walk Back* (Curb 77897), Bruce Robison's *Wrapped* (Lucky Dog ACK 69134), and his brother Charlie Robison's *Life of the Party* (Lucky Dog ACK 69327). Nanci Griffith weighed in with *Other Voices, Too*

(Elektra 62235), a great peers-and-pards affair involving just about everyone you might imagine, including the late lamented Townes Van Zandt, and Ramblin' Jack Elliott did the same sort of thing, very movingly, in *Friends of Mine* (Hightone HCD-8089). Hank Thompson and buddies (George Jones, Marty Stuart, David Ball) did themselves proud with *Hank Thompson and Friends* (Curb 77925).

From further west came another good crop. Dwight Yoakam's *Long Way Home* (Reprise 46918) was easily as good as anything he's ever done, and *Will Sing for Food: The Songs of Dwight Yoakam* (Little Dog 008) was as creative a pairing of singers and songs as I've heard. Good ole California country-rock came back hard and true in Linda Ronstadt's *We Ran* (Elektra 62206), and Ms. Heather Myles continued her odyssey of great straight West Coast country with *Highways and Honky Tonks* (Rounder 3147). I believe Ruby Lovett (*Ruby Lovett*, Curb D-77857) is a Californian, too, but I might be wrong. Either way, she's wonderful. So are the imported Brits and homegrown folk in *Big Sandy Presents the Fly-Rite Boys* (Hightone HCD-8090), and on the alt/insurgent/too-rad/too-trad front, *LA County Line* (Strawdog SDRX-002) gave us an energizing glimpse of 17 so far obscure acts (plus Rosie Flores and Chris Gaffney) on the City of Angels' outer musical fringe.

The fringes everywhere were hoppin' and poppin' in '98. Bloodshot Records corralled a bunch of unrulies for *Nashville: The Other Side of the Alley: Insurgent Country Volume 3* (BS 014). Neko Case & Her Boyfriends came on like a young Carlene Carter country-punking *The Virginian* (Bloodshot BS 028). Robbie Fulks went major-label, outside Nashville of course, with *Let's Kill Saturday Night* on Geffen Records. Also entirely listenable were Mike Ireland & Holler's *Learning How to Live* (Sub Pop/Sire 31021), Paul Burch & The WPA Ballclub's *Wire to Wire* (Checkered Past CPR 011), Kevin Gordon's *Cadillac Jack's #1 Son* (Shanachie 6029), and *Chris Knight* (Decca DRND-70007). Then there was the fabulous Billy Bragg/Wilco *Mermaid Avenue* on Elektra, fine folkie-country

duets in *Journey Home* by Jones and Leva (Rounder CD 0457) and *The Woodys* (Rounder CD 3149), and infectious pop/rock from the v-roys (*All About Town*, E Squared 1061) and The Mavericks (*Trampoline*, MCAD-70018). Finally there was a hot, double-disc dose of down and dirty country thrash in the form of *Midnight Roads & Stages Seen* (Mammoth 354 980 180) from Jason & The Scorchers recorded live.

Still in the land of alternatives to something or other, Lucinda Williams did very well, if not quite as brilliantly as usual, with *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* (Mercury 314 558 338); Kate Campbell grew even more fascinating on *Visions of Plenty* (Compass 7 4251); and Donna the Buffalo, who sound better to me than any other band in the world right now, kept their evolution coming at us with *Rockin' in the Weary Land* (Sugar Hill SHCD-3877).

Gospel music is an alternative, of course, and in that realm *The Apostle* soundtrack (Rising Tide RTD 53058) was both appealing and accessible. Not far away, *Mac, Doc & Del* (Sugar Hill SHCD-3888) came from Del McCoury, Doc Watson, and Mac Wiseman—masters having fun here, making brilliance sound easy—and *Clinch Mountain Country* (Rebel REB 5001) was a double-CD collaboration between Ralph Stanley and just about everybody (Patty Loveless, Porter Wagoner, Vince Gill, Bob Dylan). Ultimately there was *Groovegrass 101* (Reprise 47238), a kind of nuclear fusion created by producer/musician/trendmaker Scott Rouse from a union of Doc Watson and former Parliament/Funkadelic spacebass player Bootsy Collins (the Little Jimmy Dickens of funk) with results I guarantee you can't imagine. Wear protective clothing for this one, and decompress afterwards with *The Horse Whisperer* soundtrack (MCAD-70025). It too features just about everybody, George Strait to Steve Earle, and it's awful nice, mighty relaxing. Clip clip.

So, forty-six keepers in one year. It's a record. Happy trails, cowsmonauts. Be bad in '99.

Editor-at-Large Patrick Carr has been with CMM since September 1972.

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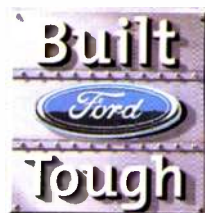
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