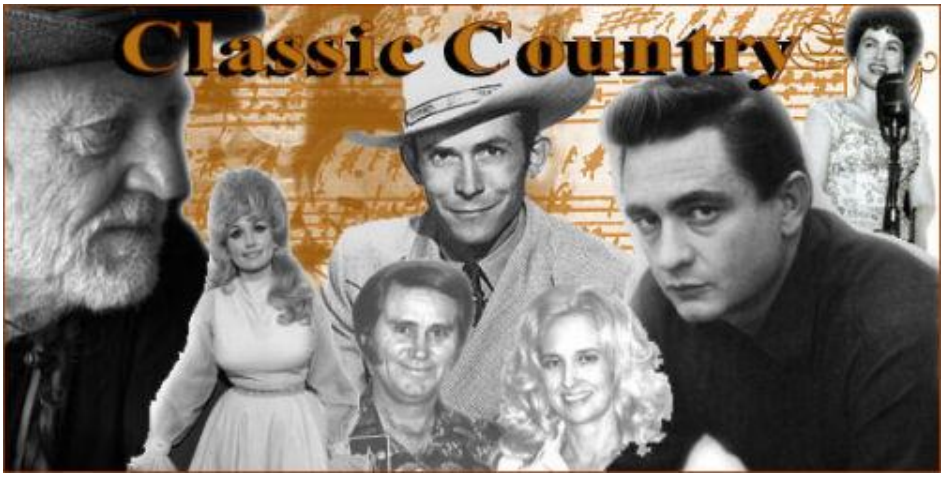


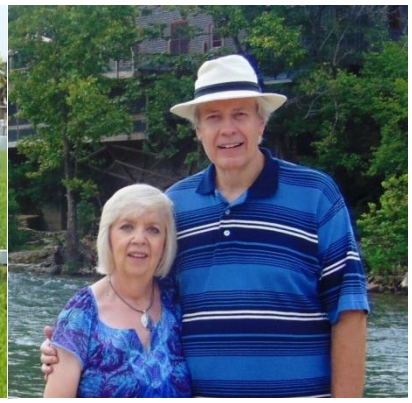
“The Stories Behind The Songs”

John Henderson

The Stories Behind The Songs

A compilation of "inside stories" behind classic country hits and the artists associated with them

John



Debbie & John

By

John Henderson

(Arrangement by Debbie Henderson)

A fascinating and entertaining look at the life and recording efforts of some of country music's most talented singers and songwriters

Author's Note

My background in country music started before I even reached grade school. I was four years old when my uncle, Jack Henderson, the program director of 50,000 watt KCUL-AM in Fort Worth/Dallas, came to visit my family in 1959. He brought me around one hundred and fifty 45 RPM records from his station (duplicate copies that they no longer needed) and a small record player that played only 45s (not albums). I played those records day and night, completely wore them out. From that point, I wanted to be a disc jockey. But instead of going for the usual "comedic" approach most DJs took, I tried to be more informative by dropping in tidbits of a song's background, something that always fascinated me. Originally with my "Classic Country Music Stories" site on Facebook (which is still going strong), and now with this book, I can tell the whole story, something that time restraints on radio wouldn't allow. I began deejaying as a career at the age of sixteen in 1971, most notably at Nashville's WENO-AM and WKDA-AM, Lakeland, Florida's WPCV-FM (past winner of the "Radio Station of the Year" award from the Country Music Association), and Springfield, Missouri's KTTS AM & FM and KWTO-AM, but with syndication and automation which overwhelmed radio some twenty-five years ago, my final DJ position ended in 1992.

Since November of 1995, I've been a studio engineer at Meyer Communications, a group of radio stations in Springfield, Missouri. This continues my association with KWTO as it is now owned by that company. My parents actually met at KWTO in 1944 (Dad was hired away from KRLD in Dallas, while my mother was already working at the station as part of Aunt Martha Haworth's "KWTO Belles" group). It was love at first sight and after a whirlwind courtship and marriage, they left KWTO and moved on to Nashville's WLAC-AM to begin their duet act. My boss Ken Meyer, owner of Meyer Communications, gets a kick out of telling people that I got my "start" at KWTO, (a term most often used to describe an announcer's first radio job). In Nashville, my parents adapted their stage name of "Ted and Wanda," and achieved some regional success throughout the south via WLAC's 50,000 watt signal. After only a few years, however, Dad grew disenchanted with the music business. They retired from the industry in 1951 and moved back to Southwest Missouri where my mother was raised. I was born in 1955.

Dad's older sister Dot, along with her husband Smokey, appeared for several years on the Grand Ole Opry and toured with Ernest Tubb's entourage in the late 1940s, performing with Tubb at New York City's Carnegie Hall in 1947 at the first of two famous country music concerts held there. Her daughter Dottie was married for a number of years to Hank Snow's son, noted evangelist Jimmie Rodgers Snow, and is now married to songwriter Glenn Douglas Tubb, (Ernest Tubb's nephew). Glenn's most famous composition is Henson Cargill's 1968 classic "Skip A Rope." He also penned Johnny Cash's "Home of the Blues" in 1958 and George Jones and Tammy Wynette's last major hit "Two Story House" in 1980. Dad's younger sister Irene Gibbs worked for Cash, serving as his personal secretary from 1973 through 1988.

I have always been fascinated with country music due to my family's close relationships with those in the industry. The stories presented in this volume are for the entertainment of those who read them. My sources for these stories are numerous and I continue to edit them on a regular basis. I have attempted to provide a glimpse of unusual or remarkable events which make the stories interesting in their context of the recording industry. I am continually updating and researching the original stories as I interview people connected with them. Much has been written about the stars and their associates (writers, producers, musicians) who created the hits and I am hopeful that readers will be as enthused about reading these stories as I have been in presenting them here. – JH

Dedication

To my wife Debbie. Her inspiration and devotion nurtures my research and writing.

Also to my late uncle Jack Henderson. Why he thought of his four-year-old nephew, I don't know, but his gift of 150 duplicate 45 RPM records from his radio station in Fort Worth/Dallas in 1959 began my interest in the study of country music.

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The Story Behind The Song:

"The Tip of My Fingers"
(written by Bill Anderson)

Bill Anderson (#7, 1960)
Roy Clark (#10, 1963)
Eddy Arnold (#3, 1966)
Jean Shepard (#16, 1975)
Steve Wariner (#3, 1992)

By 1960, Bill Anderson had moved to Nashville and become an important player in the songwriting community. Living in a small apartment, the rent paid with royalty checks, he had set up a tiny table and a manual typewriter in the living room and tried to work on a regular schedule composing new material. At this point it was his writing much more than his performing career that was making his living. For this reason, most country music fans didn't yet know who Bill Anderson was, but the artists and publishers searching for songs certainly did.

Between the songwriting sessions, Bill would often hit the road introducing himself to more and more fans. Performing at county fairs, schoolhouses, just about any venue featuring country music, Bill soon obtained a reputation as one of the most dedicated and personable newcomers in the business. Anderson had signed a recording contract with Decca Records soon after Ray Price had taken Bill's first notable composition "City Lights" to the top of the charts in 1958. Bill went all the way to #12 with his first Decca release "That's What It's Like To Be Lonesome" in early '59. Two more minor chart entries followed, "Ninety-Nine" and "Dead Or Alive," but by the Spring of '60 Anderson had not yet cracked the Top Ten as an artist. He had already proven that he could write hits for other people, but he needed to demonstrate an ability to sell the tunes he recorded himself.

At about the same time that Bill was in the process of writing "I Missed Me," a future hit for Jim Reeves, he thought of an idea that seemed inspired but jinxed at the same time. Anderson had come up with the line "I had your love on the tip of my fingers." He realized that it was a killer hook, but for weeks he couldn't devise a way to make it fit with anything else. Bill worked on the song regularly, but he couldn't turn the corner that allowed him to finish it. It was a solid month before Anderson was at last able to develop the follow-up to the hook line, then the rest of the song fell into place in fairly rapid order. Now that "The Tip Of My Fingers" was completed, the real dilemma came to the forefront: Should he demo it and allow someone else to score big? Or use this latest creation for his own next release, hoping for the breakthrough hit he needed as an artist. Bill opted for the latter.

Decca's key people, including Anderson's producer Owen Bradley, felt that Bill had all the right ingredients to become a top recording star but he himself had doubts. Bill couldn't help but remember a young man named Dave Rich, who had initially cut "City Lights" months before Ray Price had gotten hold of it. RCA Victor was convinced that Rich was going to be a big star, but his career never took off. Just getting signed to a major label doesn't necessarily mean automatic stardom, and Dave Rich is a prime example of this. Like Anderson, another songwriter who was having the same problem landing a hit record as a vocalist was Willie Nelson (who had to endure almost 15 years before "Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain" broke through in 1975), although, as it turned out, Bill didn't have to wait nearly as long as Willie did.

Decca shipped “The Tip Of My Fingers” in the late Spring of 1960. The record took off much more quickly than any of Anderson’s other releases. Some figured that the singer/songwriter’s long nights on the road and many hours visiting with local disc jockeys were finally paying off. Others believed that Decca was simply putting a bit more work into promoting this single. Yet, the record’s success was probably just due to the greatness evidenced in the final product. “The Tip Of My Fingers” had been worth the weeks of effort. It was a masterful story of lost love. The composition fully exposed the emotion and depth of Bill’s writing skills. As time would prove, the song was really that good.

With “The Tip Of My Fingers,” Bill Anderson’s recording career was on the main road to success. Within two years he would place five songs in the Top Ten and two of them were blockbusters: “Mama Sang A Song” and “Still.” These two titles locked onto the #1 position on Billboard’s country singles chart, each for seven weeks. They were bigger hits, but “The Tip Of My Fingers” had the staying power and it continued to be recorded over thirty years after Bill’s original version.

In 1963, Capitol Records introduced its newest act, a young guitarist named Roy Clark, six years before his co-hosting gig on CBS’s Hee Haw. Clark’s first single, his version of “The Tip Of My Fingers,” landed him solidly in the Top Ten. Three years after that, Eddy Arnold used the Anderson classic to hit the charts for the 93rd time. In 1975 Jean Shepard reached the country playlist for the 38th time with the song. Besides these single releases, scores of acts in and out of Nashville placed Bill’s composition on albums or used it as part of their live shows. Amazingly, with each new rendition, the song sounded as good as it had in 1960. Rather than time claiming it as a victim, “The Tip Of My Fingers” seemed to remain forever fresh.

Steve Wariner has been making his mark in Nashville since 1978. The Indiana native worked with legends like Dottie West and Chet Atkins before striking out on his own. In the mid-eighties he scored six chart-topping songs in a span of just two years. Yet, by the early nineties some country music insiders were saying that Wariner’s career had bottomed out. The hits had stopped coming and Steve and his longtime label MCA parted ways. But Arista Records gave Wariner another chance and signed him. Steve’s first record for Arista was the old Bill Anderson evergreen “The Tip Of My Fingers,” and it gave Wariner his biggest hit in four years, matching Eddy Arnold’s 1966 chart peak by topping out at #3.

In country music, some call the 1960s the “Decade of Bill Anderson.” Surrounded by many of the greatest songwriters in history, Anderson stood among the giants and wrote hit after hit for both himself and scores of other acts. It was Bill who discovered Connie Smith, brought her to Nashville and wrote the majority of her hits. Anderson is ranked by Billboard Magazine as the third most prolific country songwriter of all time (behind only Harlan Howard and Bob McDill) with over 130 of his tunes appearing on the charts, many reaching legendary status. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Swingin'"
(written by John David Anderson and Lionel A. Delmore)

John Anderson (#1 country, #43 pop, 1983)

In 1983, Ralph Emery, host of TNN's "Nashville Now," was interviewing his guest John Anderson about his new hit "Swingin.'" He asked John why he pronounced it "Swangin,'" while the female background singers on the record pronounced the word "Swingin.'" John calmly replied that "someone had to sing it properly, and I sure cain't."

"Swingin,'" with its small-town praises of amorous neighbor "Charlotte Johnson," put Anderson together with frequent writing partner Lionel Delmore – son of Alton Delmore, who registered his own number one hit, "Blues Stay Away From Me," in 1949 as one-half of the Delmore Brothers.

Lionel had the basic idea, just a line or two. He and Anderson worked on the song for a long time, but they never felt like it was quite right. Even on the day of recording they were still doing re-writes on the studio floor, and never did get to the point where they were 100% satisfied with it, but they finally agreed that you've "gotta quit somewhere" and laid down the track.

At the session, (one of the last at Columbia "Studio B" just before it was demolished), Anderson introduced "Swingin'" to his producer, veteran Frank Jones who had co-produced dozens of major hits at Columbia for over twenty years. John was using only an acoustic guitar when he first played it for Frank, and the producer was decidedly unimpressed with the song in that format.

However, as the session got underway with the band, Jones' opinion about "Swingin'" changed dramatically and he started diggin' it like everybody else. Frank especially thought the female background vocalists added a "sassy" touch to the recording. They augmented the sound even further. Anderson and Jones enlisted Mike Jordan from John's road band to play a rockin' Hammond B-3 organ solo, and punched up the track with an additional three-man horn section: tenor sax player Bill Pruett, trumpeter Don Sheffield and trombonist Dennis Good.

"Swingin'" was released on the "Wild And Blue" album which debuted on Billboard's country album chart on October 30, 1982, and Warner promotion man Stan Byrd immediately started receiving calls from radio stations nationwide, reporting that they were playing the cut off the album. In a genuinely rare event, the Warner Brothers promotions department actually emphasized that stations not play "Swingin'" until it was officially released in a single format, since the label was still trying to get the album's title track, "Wild And Blue," up the charts first. But there was no way to stop it. By Christmas time, "Swingin'" was already a smash.

The premature airing of "Swingin'" from the album did indeed slow "Wild And Blue's" ascension considerably, but it eventually reached #1 on December 25, 1982. With that little matter out of the way, Warner Brothers went into high gear with their promotion of the new single, "Swingin,'" which entered Billboard's country singles chart on January 15, 1983. It quickly slammed into the #1 slot on March 26th (selling 1.4 million copies, the biggest-selling country single in the label's history), and later that fall took "Single of the Year" honors from the Country Music Association. As a tribute to the song that had made him a fortune, John Anderson nicknamed his Martin D-35 guitar "Charlotte." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Rose Garden"
(written by Joe South)

Lynn Anderson (#1 country, #3 pop, 1970)

Joe South's first appearance on the Billboard pop album chart came on February 8, 1969, with "Introspect." Though it never was a huge seller, the project developed an impressive track record, yielding the hits "Walk A Mile In My Shoes" and "Games People Play," (the latter covered by Freddy Weller, reaching #2 on the country chart). That album had made a big impression on Lynn Anderson, a 21-year old vocalist under contract with Chart Records (a subsidiary of RCA). On May 4, 1969, Anderson married songwriter/record producer Glenn Sutton. By the following year, she had left Chart and signed with Columbia, going to #3 with her debut single for the label "Stay There 'Til I Get There." She kept insisting that Sutton allow her to record a song from the "Introspect" album called "Rose Garden" but be repeatedly nixed the idea, because some of the tune's lyrics, Sutton felt, were not suited for a female artist. Especially problematical was the line "I could promise you things like big diamond rings," which was not something a woman would say to a man, so the song was deemed inappropriate for a female to sing.

One evening at Nashville's Columbia Studios, Lynn's session ended fifteen minutes earlier than scheduled and they had nothing else planned, so Anderson again suggested "Rose Garden" to Glenn. This time Sutton relented simply for the sake of filling up the time. Lynn had secretly been practicing "Rose Garden" all the while just in case she ever got the chance to do it. She already had a makeshift arrangement worked out, but when there were problems with the first take, a few of the session players (particularly Charlie McCoy and Jerry Kennedy, who had taken a short time-out from his production chores at Mercury) came up with a different pattern, later dubbed "The Rose Garden Shuffle." It was a technique that had actually been started a few years earlier by Bill Anderson at Decca, called the "bluebeat" then. Kennedy remembered cutting an instrumental called "Blue Beat" back around '62 which featured that beat, then Owen Bradley picked up on it and cut several Bill Anderson records with that sound in the early '60s.

Initially, Columbia's country division planned another song for Lynn Anderson's next release, but label president Clive Davis, in town for a convention, happened to hear Sutton mixing "Rose Garden" in Columbia Studio B. After a second listen, Davis pronounced that it would be Anderson's next single. While "Rose Garden" vaulted toward #1 on Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart, it simultaneously went to #3 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart. The tune made its #1 landing on the country playlist December 26, 1970 where it remained for five weeks. Both the single of "Rose Garden" and the album of the same name sold in excess of one million copies, and won Lynn the 1970 Grammy for "Best Country Vocal Performance by a Female." In 1989, the song made a unique appearance on the pop charts once again when excerpts from Anderson's vocal were lifted from "Rose Garden" and inserted into "I Beg Your Pardon," a dance record by Kon Kan. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Bouquet of Roses"
(written by Steve Nelson & Bob Hilliard)

Eddy Arnold (#1 country, #13 pop, 1948)
Mickey Gilley (#11, 1975)

Perhaps the most extraordinary example of a rags-to-riches story in country music would be Eddy Arnold's. The son of a sharecropper, he spent his youth plowing fields with a mule team. In his spare time (what little of it there was), he learned to chord on his cousin's borrowed Sears guitar. By the time Eddy had grown into his teens, his favorite singers were Gene Autry and Bing Crosby. Fearful of being permanently trapped in the life of a sharecropper, Arnold left home at seventeen and put together a country band in Jackson, Tennessee. Over the course of the next few years, he drifted first to Memphis and then to St. Louis with his guitar and his songs. Though he continued to play clubs, he rarely made more than a dollar a night. The poor kid from the country had become a poorer kid in the city, and there were few signs that Eddy's luck would ever change.

Almost as if by magic, fortune smiled on Arnold in 1940 when Pee Wee King heard the young man sing. The band leader loved Eddy's smooth country style and offered him a spot in his Golden West Cowboys band. Arnold couldn't wait to pack his bags and hit the road. For the first time in his life he had a regular music job that paid solid money. King's group performed at some of the South and West's best clubs and night spots. These big-time venues offered a tremendous opportunity for Eddy to hone his talents, but what was even more important to him was that King owned a regular spot on Nashville's Grand Ole Opry. It was there that Arnold would make the most of his golden opportunity. For three years, Eddy provided vocals for the Golden West Cowboys on the road and at the Opry. In 1943, feeling that he was sufficiently seasoned, he walked away from the band and talked WSM into giving him a show of his own. Within weeks Eddy was so popular on radio that he was given a solo spot on the Opry.

Then what looked to be a huge break fell in Arnold's lap. Impressed with his voice on radio as well as his Opry following, RCA offered the singer a record deal. This big break turned out to be a false start. A union strike shut down the recording business for over a year. Because of this, it was 1945 before the record label was able to introduce its newest act. By then, thanks to his Opry connection, Eddy really needed no introduction. Unfortunately, RCA was promoting him as "The Tennessee Plowboy," perhaps the worst moniker ever for a non-comedic performer, especially an artist that the label would soon be marketing toward the pop music audience. But amazingly, this horrendous nickname would not hinder Arnold's career.

Eddy's first records failed to make the national charts. It took Arnold almost a year to produce a smash country release in "That's How Much I Love You," which spent four weeks at #2 in 1946. Eddy, who was now being managed by a former carnival circuit promoter, Colonel Tom Parker, followed it up with "What Is Life Without Love" (his first of twenty-eight number-one hits), and "It's A Sin," another chart-topper. Arnold's success with these smooth ballads seemed out of place at the Opry. He was sharing a stage with fan favorites such as Ernest Tubb, Bill Monroe and Roy Acuff. Dressed in his tailored country-style outfits, Eddy looked as if he could be Tubb's cousin, but when he opened his mouth he sounded as if he should have been on Broadway.

While many in hillbilly music saw this crooner style as an affront to "real" country music, RCA and Colonel Parker saw potential beyond the rather confined borders of Nashville-based music. Very quietly they began to market Eddy to both country and pop arenas. They also began to look for material away from the usual country songwriting circles. The table was now set for this orchestrated country/pop move in March, 1948. Arnold placed his "Anytime" atop the country charts for nine weeks while also sliding it over to #17 on the pop side. With this release, Eddy had broken over to the big chart, but only in a very small way. "Anytime" spent just one scant week in the pop numbers.

For the next single, RCA turned to a songwriting team, Steve Nelson and Bob Hilliard. The composers had just come up with a romantic ballad that seemed perfect for the nation's top pop crooners, but RCA had something quite different in mind. In a sense, "Bouquet of Roses" was a manufactured piece. It was written not to reflect a bad life experience, but in order to marry words to an already written score. Such was often the case with pop material, and this was almost always how it worked on Broadway. But in Nashville, songs were supposed to be "lived." In country music's capital, songwriting was not a nine-to-five job. It was a gift from the heavens, and the resulting tunes were supposed to be "inspired."

While "Bouquet of Roses" might have gone against the Music City grain, having been "produced" rather than "lived," the song's lyrics did have a country feel. This was the story of a jilted lover whose heart had been broken over and over again by one uncaring person. Still, even with its theme of lost love, "Bouquet of Roses" was far different from the era's other big country songs. It would have been hard to imagine Ernest Tubb or Bob Wills performing the number at a country dance hall.

Inspired or not, Eddy Arnold's recording of "Bouquet of Roses" shot to #1 on Billboard's country chart and held that position for nineteen weeks, making it the sixth-biggest country hit of all time. The record remained in the top one hundred for just over a year – fifty-four weeks, longer than any other country record in history. Yet, it was on the pop side where "Bouquet of Roses" made the most waves for Arnold. It placed at #13 on the Billboard pop listings, and more importantly stayed on the chart as a best-seller for twenty-seven weeks. While pop covers of "Bouquet of Roses" did appear, none came close to the original in chart action or sales. With Eddy Arnold, country music had finally produced a performer who didn't need to have his country hits covered by a pop artist to be accepted in the pop music world. Eddy was welcomed everywhere.

With startling speed, Eddy Arnold challenged the very fabric of country music. With his effortless style, his sophisticated touch and his country charm, he opened up the industry for a new kind of star. No longer did a performer have to work his way up via the beer halls and honky-tonks. Now, to sell records an artist didn't have to sing with a twang or a yodel, and a country music fan could now have a college degree and be from New York City. George Morgan, Tennessee Ernie Ford and Jim Reeves, among others, followed in Eddy's footsteps and with their smooth styles and country values, they won fans in both rural and urban areas. But it was Arnold who blazed the trail.

Eddy Arnold was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1966, the youngest person ever elected (at age 48). Usually, induction into the Hall takes place toward the end of an artist's career, but the year after Eddy became a member, he won the Country Music Association's "Entertainer of the Year" award and continued producing top ten hits at RCA for another thirteen years, the last being "That's What I Get For Loving You" in the summer of 1980. Arnold has hosted dozens of network television specials, regularly dressed in a tuxedo. He became the first major country act to appear on numerous mainstream television shows and was also the first to appear on the major stages of the nation's biggest cities. In the course of his career, Eddy became the most successful act in country music

chart history, placing nearly 150 singles on Billboard Magazine's country playlists, with twenty-eight of them reaching the summit. Throughout his remarkable recording career he spent 145 weeks, or almost three years, at #1.

When considering what made Eddy Arnold a worldwide star, one has to only look at the boy's earliest musical influences. On an old record player, listening to records bought with money he made plowing neighbors' fields, Eddy memorized the words to all the Bing Crosby and Gene Autry standards. Years later, with huge crossover hits like "Bouquet of Roses," Arnold successfully meshed those two vastly separate styles into one, thus bringing legions of new fans to country music, expanding the scope of his musical genre, and bringing the country hick and the city slicker a bit closer together. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Detroit City"
(written by Danny Dill & Mel Tillis)

Bobby Bare (#6 country, #16 pop, 1963)

Mel Tillis was one of Nashville's top songwriters by the late 1950s and he was looking for a follow-up to a tune he had written called "Tupelo County Jail." Webb Pierce had scored a fair-sized hit with it, so Tillis naturally began to think along those same lines. He eventually fleshed out his idea and took it to Owen Bradley at Decca Records (Bradley was Webb's producer). The first line of Mel's new song was "Last night I went to sleep in the Tupelo County Jail." Owen listened to it and shook his head. He said, "Hey Mel, write songs about somewhere other than Tupelo. You've already done that. Write a song about Chicago or someplace." Dejected, Mel took his song, along with Bradley's scathing critique, and left.

Tillis then drove to Cedarwood Publishing Company. He was a staff writer for Cedarwood (which had been founded by Pierce) and spent part of each day there. Upon his arrival, Mel ran into his friend and colleague Danny Dill and told Danny about the criticism Owen Bradley had given him on his new song. Dill thought about it for a moment, then proceeded to tell Mel about something he had observed when he was playing bars in Detroit a few years before. Dill noted that a lot of the old Southerners who had left home to make good money in the auto plants were so homesick that they drank away their paychecks in bars. The story that Danny told was a sad, depressing commentary on how some country boys just couldn't adjust to city life. Using Mel's original melody as a base, the two men set about writing a song to fit Dill's story, and they worked it up in short order. Mel couldn't wait to get back to Decca and prove to Owen Bradley that he could indeed write about someplace other than Tupelo, Mississippi.

Bradley liked the new lyrical adjustments to the tune, and thought it might be perfect to re-vitalize the recording career of Billy Grammer, who had just been signed to Decca Records. Billy had scored a monster hit back in 1959 with "Gotta Travel On" on the Monument label. It was a Top Five smash on both the country and pop charts, but Grammer wasn't able to assemble a follow-up and hadn't appeared on either chart since. Producer Bradley scheduled his first Decca session with Billy to record the Dill/Tillis number, which was still un-named. Owen actually came up with the title of the piece himself. He called it "I Want To Go Home" which Dill and Tillis had no problem with. Grammer's record

made the national playlist in early ’63, but peaked at only a modest #18 and dropped off the chart after just five weeks.

While “I Want To Go Home” failed to generate much interest among country music listeners, one man who was impressed with the song took it upon himself to re-make it into a hit. RCA Victor’s A & R Director Chet Atkins (in addition to being the most respected musician in Nashville) exercised power at RCA which could make or break careers. Atkins was in the process of building the career of a young man he had recently signed to the label, Bobby Bare. Bobby had scored a huge #2 pop hit in 1959 with a song called “The All-American Boy,” on the Ohio-based Fraternity label (although the record erroneously identified the artist as “Bill Parsons”). After Bare decided to head in a country direction and signed with RCA Victor in 1962, he garnered an immediate chart placement with the minor #18 release “Shame On Me,” but Atkins was looking for a song that would send Bobby’s career into high gear. He thought the Dill/Tillis tune might be just the ticket for Bare’s first journey into country’s Top Ten.

By the early 1960s, folk songs were coming on strong in both the rock and country divisions at RCA, and Atkins believed that Bobby Bare would be a suitable artist to bridge the gap between country and folk, and score hits on both sides of the charts. Chet was looking for a song that would showcase Bare’s sincere delivery and his strong, plaintive voice, and after hearing “I Want To Go Home,” he knew he had found the right song for his new artist.

RCA didn’t want the disc jockeys to ignore Bare’s record the way they pretty much had done with the first version of “I Want To Go Home.” Therefore, to make this record seem brand-new, the label re-titled it “Detroit City.” Surprisingly, most radio programmers and fans never made the connection between the first lackluster release and Bobby’s new one. Bare’s record took off, staying on Billboard’s country chart for eighteen weeks, reaching #6. It even crossed over into the pop listings (as Atkins had hoped) peaking at #16, a great showing for a Nashville-based production. Later in the year, “Detroit City” would go on to win a Grammy award. Bare followed up with a few more crossover folk classics, the best of these being “500 Miles Away From Home,” which actually performed better, chart-wise, than “Detroit City” had, sailing into the Top Ten on the pop chart, and peaking one position higher on the country chart at #5. However, the song that made Bobby a star, “Detroit City,” remained the fans’ favorite. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“The Dance”
(written by Tony Arata)

Garth Brooks (#1, 1990)

The way “The Dance” was written and recorded was almost like a movie script, which was ironic because the song’s composer got the idea for it after watching one of the popular films of the day.

Novice songwriter Tony Arata was attending college in Statesboro, Georgia in 1983 and playing in a band in his spare time. After graduation, he continued to perform in the local clubs. Tony heard that Jim Glaser was looking for material for his next album. Glaser’s record company, Noble Vision Records, was located in Atlanta, and Arata worked up a cassette demo of his song “The Man In The Mirror,” and took

it over there. After Jim recorded the tune (and scored a mild hit in the process, reaching #17), Tony and his wife decided to move up to Music City for good in 1986.

One night the couple drove over to the Bluebird Café in the Nashville suburb of Green Hills, a well-known "listening room" in the city where many music executives often hang out to watch non-established songwriters perform their new material, hoping to catch an extraordinary song or performer. Arata was blown away by the talent he heard, thinking that there was no way he could write songs as good as those guys. He was ready to move back to Georgia, but his wife talked him into staying in Nashville.

Several weeks later, Tony's wife was out of town on a business trip and he decided to take in a movie. The picture he selected was "Peggy Sue Got Married," starring Nicholas Cage and Kathleen Turner. In the film, Peggy Sue gets divorced when she's in her forties, and then has a chance to go back to high school and change her decisions. When Nicholas Cage asks her to dance, she starts to say no, then she looks down at the locket with the pictures of her kids in it. She realizes if she says no and doesn't marry him, the kids' pictures will fade.

Tony went away from the theater thinking about that scene for a long time. He thought about the times in life when we want to avoid the pain, but if we do, many times we will have to miss the joy in life also. The lyrics started coming and "The Dance" was born soon afterward. A few weeks after Arata composed it, he was singing at an "open microphone" event at a little club called "Douglas Corner" on Eighth Avenue in Nashville. Sitting at the bar that night was this stocky guy wearing a cowboy hat. Tony had observed a lot of fellows who look like fake cowboys with their hats on, but this guy didn't. He looked like the real deal. Tony struck up a conversation with him and found out that he too had his sights on a country music career. His name was Garth Brooks.

Later, the two men found themselves performing on the same bill at the Bluebird Café. It was a Sunday night, and they were scheduled to do the early show. Nobody had arrived yet and Arata started singing "The Dance." Garth listened intently and after it was finished, he walked over to Tony and said, "Man, if I ever get a record deal, I want to record that song!" Tony replied, "Okay, sure," thinking the chances for that ever happening were slim. At the time, Brooks was selling boots for a living and Arata was lifting fifty-pound boxes to put groceries on the table.

Amazingly though, about a year later, Garth called Tony with the news that he had just signed with Capitol Records and asked again about "The Dance." It was still available and he was excited about recording the song for his debut album, appropriately titled "Garth Brooks." A couple of months passed while Brooks completed the album and when it was finished, Garth telephoned Tony again, inviting him down to his manager's office to hear it. Arata didn't recognize "The Dance" at first because of the piano intro, but once he listened to it, he agreed that Brooks did a magnificent job of singing, and Allen Reynolds' production was superb.

In a span of ten months, Capitol issued three singles from the "Garth Brooks" package to launch his career, and each one made the Top Ten. The second Brooks single, "If Tomorrow Never Comes," even reached the #1 spot on Billboard's country chart. Generally, a country album produces two or three singles, and by the time this collection's third single, "Not Counting You," was issued, work had already begun on Garth's second album "No Fences," (which in the long run proved to be one of the biggest-selling albums in music history). However, producer Allen Reynolds was adamant about a single release for "The Dance" and campaigned for it directly with label head Jimmy Bowen, but Bowen turned him

down. Allen said, “Would you just do me a favor and go see Garth sing it live before you make your final decision?” Bowen went to one of Brooks’ concerts, and when Garth sang “The Dance,” the crowd went wild. Jimmy came back to the office and gave Reynolds a “thumbs up” for the fourth single. “The Dance” became Garth’s second #1 hit on July 14, 1990, staying at the summit for three weeks.

A great video was made for “The Dance,” incorporating footage of several American icons and examples of people who died for a dream, including President John F. Kennedy, world champion bull rider Lane Frost, the crew of the ill-fated space shuttle “Challenger,” actor John Wayne, country singer Keith Whitley and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. At the end of the video, during the piano fadeout, Brooks appears on screen with a statement about how his life was just like the song: that he could have skipped the problems he had encountered while chasing his dream for a career in music, but he “wouldn’t have missed this for the world.”

“The Dance” won trophies for “Song of the Year” from both the Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music (where it also won for “Video of the Year”), and was also was nominated for a Grammy award. It was the most-played song on country radio that year. Since its 1990 release, “The Dance,” has also become one of the most popular songs played at funerals. Garth Brooks performed it on the final episode of “The Tonight Show With Jay Leno” on February 6, 2014. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

”Don’t Let Me Cross Over”
(written by Penny Jay)

Carl and Pearl Butler (#1 country, #88 pop, 1962)
Jerry Lee and Linda Gail Lewis (#9, 1969)
Jim Reeves & Deborah Allen (#10, 1979)

Carl Butler sang in a manner that reminded folks of Roy Acuff. With his heavily accented twang and his rural church singing style, he would have been right at home at the Grand Ole Opry in the 1930s. Yet, Butler was still attending a Knoxville, Tennessee high school at that time, and wouldn’t make it to Nashville until a decade after Acuff had become the Opry’s biggest star. With one key exception, it seemed that Carl would always arrive just a bit too late to achieve noticeable recognition.

An accomplished musician and performer while still a high school student, Butler put together his own band during World War II and worked both clubs and dances. By the time he turned twenty years old in 1947, Carl had already sung on three radio stations and had a large following in the Smoky Mountain region. His name had already become well enough established to earn him an invitation to come to Nashville and join the Opry.

In Nashville, Butler began to write songs for some of country music’s more successful acts. He tried to expand his own recording career, and even took some time off to fall in love. Pearl Jones had been raised in Music City and was a solid singer who had appeared in many amateur productions, but during her first decade of marriage to Carl she was content to be a housewife. During this time, the only places she used her vocal talents were at family get-togethers and in church.

Throughout the 1950s, Carl attempted to shape himself into a recording star. Though he was able to continue to compose hit songs for other acts, Butler couldn't seem to find any acceptance on the charts for himself. A great deal of Carl's problem centered on timing. While his unabashed hillbilly style made him an Opry favorite with the older crowd, it wasn't commercial. The record buyers were into honky-tonk and rockabilly, and these were styles that Butler couldn't and wouldn't play. Stuck in an out-of-date rut, he was dropped by Capitol Records, and even though Columbia added him to their roster, the label couldn't produce a hit for him. Carl began to sense that he might have been born a generation too late.

About the same time that Carl Butler was wondering if he would ever place a record on the Billboard chart, an unknown singer named Penny Jay was performing on a Midwestern tour. Penny was in much the same position as Carl. While the singer could make a modest living entertaining before small groups in little venues, she couldn't get the break that would take her to the big time. As Penny rode along toward another show in another high school gym, she got an idea for a song that would not only send Carl Butler's name to the top of the charts, but also open the door to a new style of country music recording.

Penny would later recall that she had been watching the yellow stripes on the highway which marked the areas where you couldn't pass. These no-passing zones were so much a part of the back roads and highways that connected small, rural towns that no one ever thought much about them. Yet, on this particular day, Jay would not only notice them, but use them for a song title idea. Starting with that simple concept of not crossing a line that led to a sinful affair, she built a moralistic number about a person caught on the verge of cheating for the very first time. Penny titled her new song "Don't Let Me Cross Over." The early '60s was a very conservative era in which female vocalists didn't record cheating songs. It would be another decade before radio and the public would accept their women having feet of clay. So in order for "Don't Let Me Cross Over" to become a hit, Penny and her publisher knew that they were going to have to find the right man to cut it. Upon hearing the song, Carl Butler had an even better idea.

In 1961, Carl had finally placed one of his songs on Billboard's country chart, ("Honky Tonkitis," which reached #25) so Columbia was ready to let the singer record a hard-country follow-up. When he chose "Don't Let Me Cross Over," the label gave its approval. What really surprised everybody though, was the singer's insistence that this would make a solid duet song. Butler wanted to pull his wife out of the kitchen and have her harmonize with him on the cheating number. He reasoned that the fact that they were happily married would eliminate any negative reaction generated by the song's lyrics.

The version of "Don't Let Me Cross Over" that Carl and Pearl cut was a plaintive, pleading rendition. In their vocal inflections, accentuated by their heavy mountain twang, listeners seemed to sense that this couple was actually dealing with not wanting to fall into a sinful affair. Maybe it was because of the Butlers' hard and often harsh country style, but the pleading lyrics began to come alive. It had been years since a song had captured this kind of emotional anguish. This was probably one of the main reasons that the record skyrocketed.

"Don't Let Me Cross Over" jumped on Billboard's country singles chart on December 8, 1962. In one of country music's fastest ascensions ever, the record knocked Hank Snow's "I've Been Everywhere" out of the top spot just three weeks later on December 29th. Carl & Pearl's debut duet would hold #1 for eleven weeks total, and remain on the chart for just under half a year. Named by many polls and organizations as the "Song of the Year," "Don't Let Me Cross Over" is historically significant in that it was

one of the first mixed duet records to reach #1, although it wasn't the very first. Three other releases had accomplished this feat earlier. In 1949, Jimmy Wakely and Margaret Whiting spent an incredible seventeen weeks at the top with "Slipping Around," making it the ninth biggest country hit ever. Two more mixed duet records reached the summit during the 1950s: "A Dear John Letter" by Ferlin Husky & Jean Shepard in 1953, and "One By One" by Red Foley and Kitty Wells in 1955. Although "Don't Let Me Cross Over" was strictly rural country in style, Carl & Pearl's hillbilly hit even crossed over onto the pop charts for a couple of weeks. In an age when the smooth styles of Jim Reeves, Marty Robbins & Eddy Arnold sold the most records, the Butlers defied the odds and created a monster.

Carl and Pearl Butler would record a dozen more duets, but only one would make the Top Ten (the #9 "Too Late To Try Again" in 1964). So in reality, the couple's contributions to country music were limited to their first release. Yet, the Butlers' influence in the industry was profound. With the success of "Don't Let Me Cross Over," other labels began to seek out duet acts and record them. Eventually, the mixed duet would become a staple of most record companies' catalogs. The fallout created by "Don't Let Me Cross Over" would thus lead to more successful recording teams, such as Porter Wagoner & Dolly Parton, Conway Twitty & Loretta Lynn and George Jones & Tammy Wynette. It would also create a niche for songs specifically written for close male/female harmonies.

"Don't Let Me Cross Over" would make the Top Ten two more times. In 1969, Jerry Lee Lewis and his sister Linda Gail Lewis took it to #9. A decade later, RCA brought Deborah Allen into the studio to overdub her voice onto a track of the song by the late Jim Reeves that he had recorded in his home studio at about the same time the Butlers were topping the chart in '62. This electronically manufactured duet with Deborah Allen worked its way up to #10 in 1979. Many country male/female duet teams have probably been more talented, and certainly more successful than Carl and Pearl Butler, but the couple's huge 1962 hit helped pave the way for the other great duet performers who made their own marks in country music during the years that followed. For that, the Butlers will always be remembered. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Rhinestone Cowboy"
(written by Larry Weiss)

Glen Campbell (#1 country, #1 pop, 1975)

Glen Campbell called "Rhinestone Cowboy," the tale of a country boy trying to make it in the big city, his "philosophy song." It was the biggest-selling single of his recording career, far eclipsing his other all-time classics such as 1968's "By The Time I Get To Phoenix," and 1969's "Wichita Lineman" and "Galveston."

"Rhinestone Cowboy" was written by Larry Weiss, a Los Angeles songwriter who had moved out from New York in 1971. Weiss was a former Broadway performer, and the song was composed in the spirit of himself and friends like Neil Diamond and Tony Orlando becoming successful in the Big Apple. He combined the hope and frustration on the road to stardom with the image of a "rhinestone cowboy," two words that Larry had once heard someone use in a conversation. He observed that "Rhinestone

Cowboy" could possibly be a hit song title, and he weaved his composition around the summation of all his childhood cowboy movie heroes, particularly Hopalong Cassidy.

Weiss recorded "Rhinestone Cowboy" for his own "Black and Blue Suite" album for 20th Century Records, envisioning success as a recording artist. Instead, the track received only a smattering of airplay. Fortunately, one of those "plays" reached the ears of Glen Campbell. Glen heard Larry's cut of "Rhinestone Cowboy" on KNX Radio in Los Angeles, and acquired a demo of the song to take with him on his '74 Australian tour. Between shows, with nothing better to do, Campbell would drive through the outback country between Sydney and Brisbane, looking over the unique scenery and learning "Rhinestone Cowboy" on his car's tape player.

Campbell returned from Australia and when he got back to Capitol Records, the label's main song promoter Al Coury told Glen that he had found a song for him that would be a monster hit. He started playing "Rhinestone Cowboy." Campbell laughed and told Coury that he had already discovered and learned the song, and was ready to record it right away.

"Rhinestone Cowboy" shot to #1 on Billboard's country singles chart on August 23, 1975 and held the top position for three weeks. It made and held the summit of the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart for two weeks at about the same time. The record had sold over two million units by the end of 1975, en route to distinction as Billboard's top country single for the entire year. "Rhinestone Cowboy" earned Single of the Year and Song of the Year honors from the Academy of Country Music and took the trophy for Song of the Year from the Country Music Association. The record became one of only seven to reach #1 on both the Billboard country and pop charts during the 1970s (the others are Charlie Rich's "The Most Beautiful Girl" in 1973, Billy Swan's "I Can Help" in 1974, Freddy Fender's "Before The Next Teardrop Falls" in 1975, two by John Denver also in '75: "Thank God I'm A Country Boy" and "I'm Sorry," and C. W. McCall's "Convoy" in 1976). Nine years after "Rhinestone Cowboy's" release, it served as the inspiration for the Dolly Parton/Sylvester Stallone movie "Rhinestone." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Skip A Rope"
(written by Jack Moran & Glenn Douglas Tubb)

Henson Cargill (#1 country, #25 pop, 1968)

When Henson Cargill became an "overnight sensation" in 1968, it was the perfect melding of a castaway song and a castaway artist. Already established in Las Vegas, Cargill had made two previous trips to Nashville, attracting absolutely no interest. On his third trip, he managed to set up a meeting with one of Nashville's most-revered record producers, Don Law, who had helmed hundreds of sessions for the majority of Columbia Records' mostly all-star lineup…….artists such as Johnny Cash, Ray Price, Marty Robbins, Johnny Horton, Carl Smith, Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs, Stonewall Jackson, Carl & Pearl Butler, Lefty Frizzell and many more. After turning 65 years old in 1967, Law had been forced out at Columbia due to the company's strict mandatory retirement policy. Don wasn't ready to stop working just yet though, and started his own independent production company. His meeting with Henson Cargill went

well, but Law wasn't interested in any of Henson's original material. However, he did see potential in the Oklahoma City native.

Don scheduled a session with Cargill even before a record deal had been signed. By sheer luck, the night before the session, Henson ran into another native Oklahoman Tom Hartman, who had once worked as a disc jockey in Oklahoma City, but was now pitching songs for Tree Publishing Company. Hartman played Cargill a song called "Skip A Rope," which had already made the rounds in Nashville without catching a single taker. Cargill liked "Skip A Rope" and the next day he and Law recorded it, although even then it seemed destined to fall by the wayside. Johnny Cash had taken a look at "Skip A Rope" mainly because one of the song's co-writers Glenn Douglas Tubb (nephew of legendary country star Ernest Tubb) had written a hit for him some ten years earlier called "Home Of The Blues." Cash personally liked "Skip A Rope" but he, like everyone else, was skeptical about its possible success. However, Johnny did agree to cut "Skip A Rope" if Cargill's record failed. Due to Cash's interest and Don Law's belief that Cargill's record was going to do well, Law made an arrangement with Tree Publishing that gave him 90 days to secure a record deal for Henson before any other artist could record the song.

But once again, the Nashville establishment was hesitant to take a chance on "Skip A Rope," which blamed such cultural problems as dishonesty and racism on parents. The one company willing to give it a shot was Fred Foster's Monument Records, and it proved to be a very wise investment. Cargill signed with absolutely no advance, and within 90 days of the song's release, "Skip A Rope" had sold more than 500,000 copies. It reached #1 on Billboard's country singles chart on February 3, 1968 and stayed there for five consecutive weeks. The record also peaked at #25 on Billboard's Hot 100 pop chart, a sensational showing for a Nashville-based production.

Cargill's success as a hit-maker was short-lived, however. He achieved only two more Top 15 entries during the remainder of his career, and those occurred during the year or so after "Skip A Rope" peaked (due to the brief momentum he had built up because of that runaway hit), although he continued to land in the lower rungs of the chart through 1980. His last notable release was the #29 "Silence On The Line." In his later years, Cargill returned to the Oklahoma City area, opening a nightclub called "Henson's" which he operated in nearby Norman, Oklahoma. He died after complications from surgery on March 24, 2007 at the age of 66. Producer Don Law passed away from cancer in 1982 and was elected posthumously to the Country Music Hall Of Fame in 2001. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Can The Circle Be Unbroken"
(written by A. P. Carter, based on a hymn by Ada Habersoln and Charles Gabriel)

The Carter Family (#17 pop, 1935)

The Carter Family's final appearance on Billboard's pop music charts was on August 24, 1935. The landmark group wouldn't make its next entry onto the hit list for twenty-eight years. In the interim, country charts would come into existence, and the group would be almost totally re-vamped with only one of the original members still participating. Still, the family's influence would remain strong for decades to come. In a very real sense, the Carters cherished their roles as the standard-bearers for the

hillbilly songs that traced their heritage back to the first British folk melodies. They had popularized these "folk" sounds which were at the heart of the music genre, and while a host of other influences would shape and re-shape country music, the Carters continued to remind people of the real roots from which it all sprang.

Few fans realized that by the mid-1930s the family was no longer a real family. A. P. and Sara had divorced, and while they still worked together, their lives were focused in different directions. Maybe this lack of unity was why A. P. was especially drawn to an Ada Habersoln and Charles Gabriel hymn, "Will The Circle Be Unbroken." Working with the 1907 song's chorus, Carter rewrote the verses and asked the haunting question "Can the circle be unbroken?" As A. P. composed it, the song was now set at a funeral. The mourners were questioning if they would ever be united again with their mother. Would there be a time, by and by, when their family circle would once again be unbroken? (For A. P. the answer was no. Sara married one of his cousins in 1938.)

"Can The Circle Be Unbroken" was a big seller in rural areas. While the city folks may have passed it over as just another hymn, those suffering through the Depression in the hills and valleys clung to it as if it were a personal statement of faith. It quickly became one of the most popular funeral hymns. In a world where few folks had any individual wealth, family relationships were cherished deeply. This song spoke to those heartfelt emotions as few songs ever had.

Beyond the song's emotional content, "Can The Circle Be Unbroken" brought to the forefront the gospel and religious elements which had so helped to shape early country music (this combination of gospel and secular was continued in such classics as Roy Acuff's "Wreck On The Highway"). By and large, those who sang and would continue to sing country music could trace their singing roots to the church. It was there that they were first exposed to organized music. This was the foundation that led them to seek out other forms of musical expression, and often on stage shows and in recordings, it was gospel music to which almost all of them returned. In its original release, "Can The Circle Be Unbroken" reached #17 on the pop charts. It remained there for just one week. Then, just like the family, the song quietly disappeared from national view. Yet, like the Carters, "Can The Circle Be Unbroken" lingered in the public rural consciousness, where it would remain for decades.

Carl Perkins was traveling with Johnny Cash on his road show in 1968. An accomplished songwriter, rockabilly artist Perkins had composed the classic "Blue Suede Shoes," brought to prominence by Elvis Presley, as well as Carl's own #1 appearance on Billboard's country charts and a four-week stay at #2 on the Billboard pop listing in 1956. Perkins had grown up listening to the Carters and "Can The Circle Be Unbroken." Now In the guise of original member Maybelle and her daughters Anita, Helen and June (who later married Cash), the Carter Family was now backing Johnny on stage, and the family's music was again all around Perkins. One night while waiting in his dressing room for a show call, the noted guitarist began to play around with a new song built on the Carter gospel classic. As soon as Carl had roughed it out, he took it to Cash. The man in black was impressed and urged Perkins to finish it. When the song was complete, Johnny earmarked it for his next recording session. Carl called his new song "Daddy Sang Bass."

"Daddy Sang Bass" borrowed from the Carter classic by asking the question "Will the circle be unbroken?" On his way to his best year ever in the music business, Cash recorded Perkins' composition with both the Carter Family and the Statler Brothers adding harmonies. Jan Howard provided the line, "Mama sang tenor" (most listeners erroneously think that was wife June's voice). Sandwiched between a live concert remake of "Folsom Prison Blues" (which was a much bigger hit the second time around

than the first release in 1956) and “A Boy Named Sue,” “Daddy Sang Bass” reached #1 only five weeks after its chart debut and remained on top for six weeks. While this was an important step in revitalizing the original song and continuing Cash’s Hall of Fame climb, “Can The Circle Be Unbroken’s” complete rebirth occurred in 1972 with a rock group acting as the midwife.

In the midst of the acid-rock music era, Jeff Hanna and John McEuen had formed one of rock music’s most-successful folk groups. With its soft sounds, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band was to produce one of the era’s best-remembered recordings, “Mr. Bojangles.” Their chart and album success presented the band with the freedom to occasionally stray from normal marketing parameters. Thus, they hatched an idea that would lead to one of the most important albums in music history.

Journeying to Nashville from their West coast home base, Hanna and McEuen teamed with the likes of Roy Acuff, Doc Watson, Earl Scruggs, Merle Travis and Maybelle Carter, along with Music City’s best acoustical pickers. What resulted from this marriage of young and old and folk and country was a Grammy-winning effort that celebrated some of country music’s most-treasured songs. These cuts would reawaken both the public and the industry to the genre’s rich, living history and some of its most important older contributors.

For the Carter Family, this reunion was really special because the thirty-six song, three-record album took its name from the Carters’ old gospel classic. This time the cut was retitled “Will The Circle Be Unbroken.” With Mother Maybelle playing autoharp and singing lead, these unique cross-generational recording sessions that made up this album, cemented the song as the binding tie between country music past, present and future. Almost twelve years after A. P.’s death, it also enthusiastically and affirmatively answered the song’s haunting question. Yes, as far as country music is concerned, the circle will be unbroken. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“Orange Blossom Special”
(written by Ervin T. Rouse)

Johnny Cash (#3 country, #80 pop, 1965)
Charlie McCoy (#26, 1973)
Johnny Darrell (#63, 1974)

Awhile back I received an inquiry from one of the readers of my “Classic Country Music Stories” column on Facebook wanting to know who the “mystery voice” is on Johnny Cash’s 1964 recording of “Orange Blossom Special,” who asks Cash a couple of spoken-word questions during the song. Most accounts credit the voice as belonging to Roebuck “Pops” Staples, patriarch and leader of the R&B group “The Staple Singers” (they dropped the “s” at the end of their surname). The group had a handful of hits in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s and eventually ended up in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. With that question answered, it occurred to me that the story behind this song, which dates all the way back to 1936, might make for pretty interesting reading in itself.

A hillbilly band known as the Rouse Brothers (consisting of brothers Ervin, Gordon and Earl Rouse) made a living playing fiddle-based country music in their native Florida. While the band never placed a single record on the national charts, didn't become members of the Grand Ole Opry, and have been all but forgotten by the music industry and fans alike, one of their songs stands as an instantly recognizable country music icon. It would be hard to imagine country music without it.

In 1936, Ervin Rouse was constantly fooling around on stage with a fiddle piece that he had never really named but occasionally referred to it as "a little bit crazy." No matter that it didn't have a handle, the crowds at dances and fairs ate it up. The way the brothers played their instruments, the audiences swore that they could hear a train coming right through the middle of the song. Observing the reaction to the rapidly-paced instrumental, the group's manager Lloyd Smith had a brainstorm. Why not make it a real train song?

Smith convinced the manager of the Seaboard Railroad station in Miami that the Rouse Brothers had a number that would be perfect to play at the christening of the company's new Miami-to-New York passenger service. He even promised the folks at Seaboard that the fiddle tune would be named after their new train, the Orange Blossom Special. The railroaders were quickly drawn in by Smith's smooth salesmanship, and even helped the promoter create a carnival-like atmosphere for the debut of the train and this "new" song.

When the Rouse Brothers learned about being booked at the Miami railroad station for the christening of the new train, they had no idea what was really going on, but they figured their manager knew what he was doing and let him handle it. The boys were just happy to have the work. During the Great Depression any kind of paying date was to be treasured, but one that included a large number of government officials, some of Miami's and the state of Florida's most prominent citizens, and several members of the press was a real stroke of luck. And to top it off, their song was going to launch the newest train on the line! To the Rouses, it seemed that things couldn't get any better. Unbeknownst to them, however, was the fact that their manager had copyrighted Ervin's song in his own name and that any profits would be forwarded to Smith, not the song's writer. It would be some months before Ervin Rouse noted that Lloyd Smith had been given credit for composing "Orange Blossom Special." When he discovered that his song had been taken away from him, he and his brothers geared up for a fight.

It took Ervin Rouse over a year, but he finally won the right to have Smith's name removed from the song's copyright, as well as winning the right to all future publishing royalties. With "Orange Blossom Special" again all his, Ervin sat down and wrote words to his "crazy little fiddle tune." Keeping the railroad theme, he came up with a lyric centered on the fastest train on the line. In 1939, the Rouse Brothers journeyed to New York City and recorded their song for RCA. While it enjoyed some regional play, "Orange Blossom Special" never landed on the national pop charts (country charts didn't come into existence until 1944).

While the Rouses may have largely been forgotten by country music fans, their song wasn't. Bill Monroe used it in his bluegrass shows, even bringing it to prominence on record in 1942 (with Art Wooten on fiddle). Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys played it at their dances. By the late 1940s it was hard to find a hillbilly band, famous or not, that didn't do some version of "Orange Blossom Special" in their live shows. Yet, while the song was recorded scores of times on albums and had become a concert and dance favorite, it didn't gain any single-release success until almost four decades after its debut.

In 1962, Johnny Cash had taken Jimmie Rodgers' 1928 classic "In The Jailhouse Now" to Top Ten status (although the 1955 Webb Pierce version was a much bigger hit). In looking for another oldie, Johnny turned to a number that had worked well in his concert sets, "Orange Blossom Special." Cash's version was far different than any which had preceded it. Rather than using a fiddle as the lead instrument, on stage Johnny played a pair of harmonicas. The entertainer's showmanship and flair was apparent even on the recorded version that came out of Nashville's Columbia studio on December 20, 1964, although producer Don Law turned over the harmonica duties at the session to Charlie McCoy. The recording also prominently featured a very uncharacteristic instrument for country records at the time, a saxophone played by Boots Randolph, who had scored a major pop hit the previous year with his "Yakety Sax." The Johnny Cash version of "Orange Blossom Special" was light years away from what Ervin Rouse had envisioned when he wrote his "crazy little fiddle tune," but that didn't stop it from becoming a hit. Johnny's rendition of the old standard began its climb up Billboard's country singles chart on February 20, 1965, where it peaked at #3, holding that position for three weeks. It even nudged the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart for six weeks, but topped out at only a modest #80. This was Johnny Cash's 31st of forty-eight titles to appear on the pop listings, the most of any country artist.

At the December 20th session, Cash became curious about "Orange Blossom Special's" origin, and asked his future mother-in-law Maybelle Carter if she knew who had written it. Without hesitation, she told him Ervin Rouse was the composer, and that she thought he lived somewhere in South Florida. Johnny wanted to meet the man, so with assistance from a couple of his contacts in that area, a search was undertaken to locate Rouse. They found him living as a recluse in a ramshackle dwelling in the Big Cypress Swamp region of Southern Florida's Everglades. He hunted, trapped and fished to stay alive, and now and then he would emerge from the swamp and perform his classic song at local bars for tip money. Rouse was obviously bitter toward the country music industry for passing him by. Although the life of a hermit was the one he had chosen, Rouse was somehow convinced not only to attend a concert Cash was headlining in Miami, but to join Johnny on stage for a duet on "Orange Blossom Special." It brought down the house. After their meeting at the Miami concert, Cash stayed in touch with Rouse and helped him financially through the end of his life. He died in 1981 at the age of 64.

After Cash scored with "Orange Blossom Special," Charlie McCoy (who had played on Johnny's record) came out with his own classic harmonica interpretation of the tune in 1973. His instrumental reached #26. The following year, minor player Johnny Darrell (who had the original Top Ten hit of "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town" a couple of years before Kenny Rogers got hold of it) made his eighteenth and final appearance on the national charts with another version of the classic Rouse composition.

When Ricky Skaggs brought bluegrass back onto the national scene in the late 1970s, the standard fiddle versions of "Orange Blossom Special" came back strong too. Just about every country music fan older than 50 is quite familiar with the old tune. It would be hard to imagine entertainers such as Skaggs or Charlie Daniels leaving a stage without bringing out a hot fiddle arrangement of the number. The Rouse Brothers had begun "Orange Blossom Special's" long ride into immortality with a short concert at a Miami train station. Ironically, they never bought a ticket or took a ride on the train that bore their tune's name. Yet, thanks to Ervin T. Rouse, millions of country music listeners have had a chance to ride this special train in song, and even in this modern world of so-called country music which sadly isn't very "country" anymore, "Orange Blossom Special" will always be around for the diehard fans of true country music to seek out and enjoy. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"She's Got You"
(written by Hank Cochran)

Patsy Cline (#1 country, #14 pop, 1962)

With the late songwriter Hank Cochran's induction into the Country Music Hall Of Fame in 2014, one of his greatest successes comes to mind: Patsy Cline's biggest chart hit: "She's Got You," which spent five weeks in the #1 position on Billboard's country singles chart beginning in March, 1962. The record also climbed to #14 on the Billboard "Hot 100" pop chart, an unusually high tally for a country release. Here's the backstory of "She's Got You:"

1961 had been a watershed year for Cochran. He had collaborated with Harlan Howard in the writing of "I Fall To Pieces," Patsy Cline's first of only two #1 hits during a brief career tragically cut short by her death. That record, along with her debut single "Walkin' After Midnight" four years earlier, had fully established Cline as a major force in country music and "I Fall To Pieces" had proven Cochran's songwriting abilities in a big way. Hank was basking in the glow of not only having written one of the year's biggest hits, but also having discovered an up-and coming songwriter from Texas by the name of Willie Nelson. Cochran was sitting in the catbird seat, at least in prestige.

However, all was not good. The royalties for "I Fall To Pieces" wouldn't be coming in for another year, and Cochran was living on a meager $50 a week, his draw from the publishing company he was writing for, Pamper Music. He gave up a raise in order for the company to have the means to sign his friend Nelson to a songwriter's contract. Hank knew the money would soon be rolling in, but that didn't help him any right now. Patsy had been pressing Cochran to write her another hit. Hank made several attempts but just couldn't come up with anything she or her producer Owen Bradley liked. Cline had just landed a big record with Nelson's "Crazy," and Cochran really wanted to be the one to write the next single but it just wasn't happening. Patsy phoned Hank almost daily to see if the tunesmith had any new material for her. Each day the response was always the same. As the time approached for Cline to go back into the recording studio, it looked as though Cochran wouldn't be able to deliver. It seemed like the harder he tried, the more difficult it became to develop a song idea that had potential.

With the pressure of Patsy's upcoming recording session looming over him like a black cloud, Cochran was practically living at the office. Sitting at an old desk, he would scribble down his thoughts on paper, then after hours of fruitless work, pitch them in a trash can. One particular afternoon, Hank and several other writers had been in the studio in back of the building, just guitar-pulling and writing. Around five or six o'clock, everyone started to drift toward home. Cochran decided to stay, hoping the solitude would help him think. He had been there by himself for a while and still wasn't able to develop any ideas. When pacing didn't jog any new thoughts, he sat down and started looking around the little room. There were no windows and the furnishings were stark. There just wasn't much to see. Hank leaned back in his chair and pulled open the desk drawer that was right in front of him. The first thing he saw was a photograph, and immediately an idea hit him. He picked up a pad and wrote: "I've got your picture, the one you gave to me" and shortly afterward, Cochran brought together "She's Got You." After weeks of trying, Hank had finally delivered in a big way. The lyrics to "She's Got You" were finished in a matter of just a few minutes and Cochran quickly developed a melody. Singing it to himself, the writer felt confident that he had written a Patsy Cline hit. Now the question became: what would her

reaction be? After all, Patsy hadn't personally liked either "I Fall To Pieces" or "Crazy" at first. Of course, she eventually grew to love both of them after they became big hits.

Hank excitedly called Patsy at home telling her "I've got it! I've got your song!" She quickly replied "well, bring the darn thing over here Hoss" (she had a penchant for calling almost all of her male friends "Hoss," presumably after Dan Blocker's character on "Bonanza."). Cline lived on the other side of Nashville and just getting to her house took Cochran the better part of an hour. Hank finally arrived and as he sang "She's Got You" for her, Patsy's customary "matter-of-fact" demeanor gave way to tears as she listened (an indication that she definitely liked it), and she immediately telephoned Owen Bradley, shouting "Hank's got it, he's got the song we need!" When Bradley heard the tune the next day, he agreed. It was one of the rare times that the producer and singer were both satisfied with the same song.

Patsy recorded "She's Got You" at the Quonset Hut on the evening of December 17, 1961. Many of the usual group of Nashville's celebrated "A-Team" musicians were on board including Grady Martin on electric guitar, Bob Moore on acoustic bass, Harold Bradley on electric bass and Buddy Harman on drums, with Floyd Cramer supplying the marvelous piano fills, adding extra sparkle to the record (as he had done four months earlier on "Crazy"). Also participating on the session were Randy Hughes (Cline's manager and pilot of her ill-fated '63 Kansas City flight) on acoustic guitar, along with the Jordanaires providing the background vocals. "She's Got You," the song inspired by a photo left in a desk drawer, debuted on Billboard's country chart March 3, 1962 and took just three weeks to reach the summit, one of the fastest ascensions in chart history. When Decca shipped "She's Got You," the songwriter was on pins and needles. Cochran thought, "She's had two monster hits in a row. What if this one flops?" Hank worried needlessly because not only did "She's Got You" do remarkably well, but in a recording career that delivered several all-time classic performances, this song would go down as Patsy Cline's biggest hit.

Just six months after Patsy's record peaked, Cochran signed his own recording contract with the Liberty label and charted a few singles which landed in the Top 30, but it was his genius as a songwriter that made him a Nashville legend. Billboard Magazine ranks Hank Cochran the eleventh most prolific songwriter in country music history, with 105 of his songs making that publication's country and pop charts. He was elected to the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1974. Until his death in 2010, Cochran always had difficulty talking about Patsy Cline, often getting emotional when reminiscing about her. Hank was keenly aware that she was a tremendous part of his success. Patsy was the first female artist elected to the Country Music Hall of Fame (in 1973) and 41 years later, Hank Cochran became an inductee himself, enshrined in the Hall's "Class of 2014." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Above And Beyond"
(written by Harlan Howard)

Buck Owens (#3, 1960)
Rodney Crowell (#1, 1989)

Harlan Howard, the "dean of Nashville songwriters," had already tasted great success with his song "Above And Beyond" when Buck Owens took it to #3 on Billboard's country singles chart in 1960, where it stayed for four weeks. Howard had written "Above And Beyond" not long after moving to Nashville, and was pleased when he heard that Rodney Crowell was going to remake the song for his big-budget Columbia album "Diamonds And Dirt" in 1988.

Crowell told Harlan that the idea was for it to also be released as a single and upon hearing Rodney's completed version, Howard predicted a Top-Five finish (not quite ready to really go out on a limb and predict a #1 landing). In fact, Rodney had planned all along for "Above And Beyond" to be the very first single issued from the album, but things didn't turn out that way. Time went by and four other songs from the project had already been selected by Columbia as singles (all four becoming #1 hits) but "Above And Beyond" still hadn't been, so Harlan had pretty much given up on his song making the national playlists again.

The old tune, nevertheless, had been initially earmarked for a very special purpose. Crowell's co-producer Tony Brown's intention was to make "Above And Beyond" the album's centerpiece in order to provide the project with a "direction." They recorded it first on purpose, to set the mood and tone of the album. That way, the rest of the songs wouldn't take too big of a departure from mainstream country, which had been revitalized in a big way during country music's "Neo-Traditionalist" movement of the late-1980s, spotlighting such stars as Randy Travis, Ricky Van Shelton, Clint Black, Keith Whitley, Vern Gosdin, Dwight Yoakam and of course "King" George Strait.

Rodney Crowell was nine years old in 1960 when he learned to sing "Above And Beyond" by listening to Buck Owens' hit record. Years later, he became a good friend of songwriter Howard, even teaming up with him to co-write a #1 hit for Highway 101 called "Somewhere Tonight." At about the same time, Crowell's "Diamonds And Dirt" album was in the planning stages and it was then that Rodney told Harlan that he would be cutting "Above And Beyond" for it, and would also be campaigning for Columbia to issue it as a single. When the label held back, Buck Owens himself even gave some passing thought for a time about re-making his own hit.

Finally Crowell's version hit the streets in June of '89. The "Diamonds And Dirt" album had already produced four #1 singles, tying it with Earl Thomas Conley's 1984 album "Don't Make It Easy For Me" for the most chart-toppers from one package. The fourth single, "After All This Time," had also set a personal record for Rodney, making him the first artist to write, produce and perform four #1 hits from the same album.

After "Above And Beyond" reached Billboard's summit on September 23, 1989, the "Diamonds And Dirt" project then stood alone as producing the all-time highest number of chart-topping singles with five, a mark which still stands today. One last footnote: In a recording career that spanned the years 1978 to

2003 and saw twenty-five singles charted, Rodney Crowell notched a total of five #1 hits and all five came from the "Diamonds And Dirt" collection! – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"16th Avenue"
(written by Thom Schuyler)

Lacy J. Dalton (#7, 1982)

The year was 1982 and Thom Schuyler and his new wife had purchased a small bungalow near the area of Nashville's 100 Oaks Mall, and they began settling into their married life together. It was late one Friday night and Thom was just picking around at home. He didn't have any song ideas on his mind. This was not an instance where he thought, "Hey, I've just come up with a great idea. I can't wait to start writing!" Nonetheless, some lyrics came to him and he jotted them down. In short order, Schuyler had worked up three verses, then he decided to stand back and take a look at what he had so far. His assessment was that the new piece was too much of an "industry" song, which would mean very little to the general public as a whole. Not containing a chorus, the tune didn't even have the structure of a commercial song. So Thom just threw it in a desk drawer. He did give it a title: "16th Avenue."

About three months later, he played it for his publisher Even Stevens, who was working a lot with Eddie Rabbitt then and had a publishing company on Music Row. Stevens asked Thom if he was working on anything. Schuyler told him, "Yes, but I don't think it's very commercial." Thom played the song for him and Stevens' eyes got big as saucers. He said, "Where did that come from?" Thom said he didn't know, that it just popped into his head one night. Even said, "Well, work on it some more."

Schuyler admits to being an "absurdly practical guy," and as he was preparing to come to Nashville to pursue a career as a songwriter, he had saved up enough money so he wouldn't have to stay in the boarding houses along Music Row, or live in his car, or do any of the other desperate things mentioned in the song, but Thom observed other people who did and he listened to their stories.

Once Schuyler had finished "16th Avenue" (still without a chorus), he did a little demo of the tune and it got into the hands of Jerry Smith, who had worked with a lot of new artists over the years to help them get their start. He was plugging some songs for Even Stevens and Eddie Rabbitt, and Smith took "16th Avenue" and another song Thom had written, "My Old Yellow Car" over to Billy Sherrill's office at Columbia. Jerry came back to report that Billy liked both tunes, but "My Old Yellow Car" was his favorite.

A couple of days later, Sherrill called Thom at the publishing house to set up a meeting. A chat with the legendary producer was quite a thrill for the young songwriter. Billy was very generous with his time, and he ended up recording both "16th Avenue" and "My Old Yellow Car" with Lacy J. Dalton, a singer Sherrill was producing at the time. "My Old Yellow Car" was used only as an album filler for Dalton, but the song did become a Top Ten hit for Dan Seals three years later in 1985.

Columbia issued Lacy's cut of "16th Avenue" as a single. It debuted on Billboard Magazine's country playlist on September 11, 1982 and was progressing up the chart at a steady pace when the song was

used to open the 1982 Country Music Association Awards telecast. As Dalton performed it live on the main stage, a montage of old and new clips of downtown Nashville, and photos of would-be stars walking the streets carrying their guitar cases, were shown on the big screen behind her. Schuyler thought it was a great presentation.

As a songwriter, Thom Schuyler composed tunes recorded by over 200 different artists. He himself appeared on the charts, first as a solo performer for Capitol Records, then as a member of the trio S-K-O (with fellow tunesmiths Fred Knobloch and Paul Overstreet), which charted seven singles in the mid-1980s, including the #1 hit "Baby's Got A New Baby." Schuyler was eventually made chairman of the Country Music Association and headed RCA Records' Nashville division from 1992 to 1995. Under his watch at RCA, he signed singer Kenny Chesney and the band Lonestar to the label, and played a significant role in launching the careers of Martina McBride and Sara Evans.

From time to time, when Thom hears Lacy J. Dalton's recording of "16th Avenue" from more than thirty years ago, he's reminded what a fine record it was, how well Billy Sherrill produced it, and how great Lacy's vocal was. Of all of Schuyler's compositions, "16th Avenue" is the song most identified with him, although to this day, he believes it to be an "insider" song and was surprised when Dalton's record, as great as it was, managed to climb to #7 in Billboard (no doubt helped by its showcase on the CMA telecast). Thom wrote songs that fared much better on the charts, some even reaching #1 (such as Kenny Rogers' "Love Will Turn You Around," Michael Martin Murphey's "A Long Line Of Love," and Earl Thomas Conley's "Love Out Loud"). Many times the bigger hits aren't always the ones remembered, but people remember "16th Avenue." Some call it "the songwriter's anthem," and to Thom, that's quite an honor. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Six Days On The Road"
(written by Earl Greene & Carl Montgomery)

Dave Dudley (#2 country, #32 pop, 1963)
Sawyer Brown (#13, 1997)

In the 1940s, folks from around Stevens Point Wisconsin would turn out in droves every time they heard that young Dave Dudley was going to be featured. He was the best performer the small community had ever seen, and everyone thought that one day this high school sensation was going to make it to the big time. The whole town was sure that Dave was going to be a star. But it wasn't country music that they were talking about. It was baseball. Dudley was a six-foot-two-inch star baseball pitcher in his youth. While he played a little guitar on the side, no one seemed to notice. When Dave's future was talked about in barber shops and taverns around the area, the locals had bets on when he would make the major leagues, not when he would sing on the Grand Ole Opry. By 1949, Dudley was playing for a minor league team in Texas, and was well on his way to making himself the Pride of Stevens Point, when a severe arm injury ended his baseball career.

Dudley came home from Texas not knowing which direction to head next. Baseball had been his whole life. His entire identity had been wrapped around his prowess on the baseball field. By getting hurt, he

had shattered not only his own dreams, but the hopes of an entire town. In post-war America, playing in the major leagues was about as good as it got. Now it seemed that when local folks talked about Dave, they always began each observation with the words “what if.” Yet, the former baseball star knew that he couldn’t live on past glory. In order to pay the bills, he was going to have to find something else that he could do well.

A chance visit to a radio station gave Dudley an opportunity to revive an old talent. A friend remembered Dave’s guitar playing and wondered if he would like to perform live on the local station. Dave decided to give it a try, and turned out to be very popular right out of the gate. Fan mail came into the station at such a rate that Dudley soon had his own show. By 1953, Dave formed a trio and for the next seven years performed country music at clubs all across the northern tier of the United States. In 1960, just when it looked as if he was going to get a record contract that would take him to Nashville, Dave was struck by a car and nearly lost his life. Recuperating in bed for the next six months, he eventually worked his way back into radio and a few performances in the Minneapolis area, but his second chance at the big time seemingly had gone the way of the first. The “what ifs” were again coming back to haunt him.

At the time that Dudley was striving to regain his momentum, a couple of fellows named Earl Greene and Carl Montgomery were driving a semi-trailer up and down the East coast. Their Robbins Floor Products run was six days long. The drivers would leave Tuscumbia, Alabama either Sunday night or early Monday morning and wouldn’t return until Saturday afternoon. After cleaning up, the men would then head down to a local club and play country music. After a night of playing, they would return to their rig and head back north with a fresh load of freight.

One day while making a run to Pittsburgh, the two men turned off the radio and began to talk about how long six days really is. As they visited about their type of work and the long, lonely hours involved, one of them said, “you know, a story about being on the road for six days might be a pretty good idea for a song.” Inspired, the drivers used truckers’ lingo and began to piece together a song that told the story of a trucker’s life. From the ICC to ten forward gears to popping pills to stay awake, their composition began to capture the real feel of the road. It wasn’t just a song, it was the autobiography of every truck-driving man who had ever made a long haul. By the time Greene and Montgomery returned home on Saturday, they were ready to deliver a finished product to the patrons at the local club.

“Six Days On The Road” made the rounds in Southern honky-tonks before being carried north by the men who drove the big rigs. Eventually, the song found its way to Minnesota and into the hands of a now fully-recovered Dave Dudley. Buying time at a local studio, Dudley recorded the Greene/Montgomery truck-driving song and printed up a few copies. When Dave hit the road for a series of show dates in North Dakota, he turned the records over to a friend. In his spare time, the man worked the region’s truck stops and diners, convincing the owners to put “Six Days On The Road” on their jukeboxes. Dudley’s record quickly became a favorite and area radio stations began to clamor for it.

A local label called Soma Records picked up the song and filled orders by simply printing more of Dave’s own cut. When that small label was unable to handle the growing number of orders, Golden Wing Records stepped in and pressed more copies. With absolutely no national publicity, no promotions people working the phones, and without the benefit of a label with which disc jockeys and fans were familiar, “Six Days On The Road” suddenly was traveling coast to coast and border to border. All the

while, Dave Dudley was working obscure little clubs in small towns, unaware that he had a potential hit on his hands. By the time he returned home, truck drivers had made his song their national anthem.

On June 1, 1963, Dave's homemade cut of "Six Days On The Road" entered Billboard's country singles chart. Pushed by the demand of truckers and the disc jockeys who served them, the song climbed up the playlist like an eighteen-wheeler with a quick deadline and a load of perishables. Before it finished delivering the goods, the song's run would last a total of twenty-one weeks, with two of those sitting in the #2 slot. Overnight, after working small-town clubs for thirteen years, Dave Dudley was a star.

Mercury Records saw the potential in Dave's deep voice and signed him to a long-term contract. Forming a band known as the Roadrunners, Dudley hit the road playing the most important dates of his life. Several times he rolled up and down the Eastern Seaboard, and six days out on the road was now a comparatively short haul. Over the course of a career that produced chart hits through 1976, Dudley became a Grand Ole Opry regular, played thousands of dates, and scored with a wide variety of songs, touching on themes such as pocket billiards (Tom T. Hall's "The Pool Shark," Dave's lone #1 hit from 1970) to the war in Vietnam ("What We're Fighting For," another Hall composition that reached #4 in 1966). Yet, it was his signature song "Six Days On The Road," as well as others about trucking, like "Truck Drivin' Son-Of-A-Gun" (#3), "Anything Leaving Town Today" (#12), "There Ain't No Easy Run" (#10), "One More Mile" (#12) and "Me And Ole C. B." (#12) that would instantly identify him everywhere he went. Dudley was the "King of the Truck Stops" and it was the truckers who would always think of him as one of their own.

Over the years, truck drivers have remained some of country music's most loyal fans. Legendary disc jockeys broadcasting on the nighttime sky wave radio signals such as Ralph Emery at WSM/Nashville, Bill Mack at WBAP/Fort Worth-Dallas, Charlie Douglas at WWL/New Orleans and Mike Hoyer at WHO/Des Moines have kept these hardworking men company on long nights when the road was lonely and the drive was hard. Probably more than any other single group, truckers have identified the most with country music artists, the performers who hit the road traveling from town to town, setting up their sound equipment to do a show, only to tear down and move on again. In country music's early days, Ted Daffan struck a chord with truck drivers in the early 1940s with "Truck Driver's Blues." Then Dave Dudley came along in the '60s with his steady output of trucker-themed hits. Red Sovine scored with his recitations "Giddyup Go" and "Teddy Bear," and C. W. McCall tore up the '70s with "Convoy." Several other acts have paid tribute to truckers through songs like 1975's "Roll On Big Mama" by Joe Stampley, 1977's "East Bound And Down" by Jerry Reed and 1984's "Roll On Eighteen Wheeler" by Alabama, to name just a few. Yet, the truck-driving song that will always be considered the most significant, the granddaddy of 'em all, is "Six Days On The Road." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Bye Bye Love"
(written by Boudleaux and Felice Bryant)

The Everly Brothers (#1 country, #2 pop, 1957)
Webb Pierce (#7, 1957)

At the dawn of the rockabilly craze, many were predicting that the death of country music was eminent. The new nationwide musical surge, headed by Elvis Presley, put traditional artists on life support virtually overnight. The young performers who were now dominating Billboard's country chart (Presley's "Hound Dog" and "Jailhouse Rock" were multiple-week #1 country hits!) had absolutely no desire of saving the traditional hillbilly sounds that had established country music's identity from the beginning. To them, the only sound that they were interested in was the sound of the cash registers and the tons of money generated by their enormously popular rock and roll records of the mid-1950s. Yet, in the midst of all these Southern boys who rocked all the major charts of the day, two brothers emerged who brought old-style country harmonies to modern, Nashville-penned songs.

Don and Phil Everly had come from a family which had a deep rural music tradition. Their father had been one of the primary influences on a young Merle Travis. Both parents, Ike and Margaret Everly, had been singing country music on radio for a generation. Migrating from Kentucky in the mid-forties, this husband and wife duo had become the anchor and identity of KMA Radio in Shenandoah, Iowa, which then boasted (along with KWTO in Springfield, Missouri) one of the biggest and best stables of country music talent in the Midwest among low-powered stations (both KMA and KWTO transmitted with only 5,000 watts). The Springfield station ended up edging out KMA in prestige because of a little show that KWTO originated called the "Ozark Jubilee," and with the assistance of some nationally-known stars who signed up to appear on it, the program later moved to network television for a healthy six-year run in prime time.

The Everly's sons were brought up with their parents' traditional country style of picking and singing. While the boys were still in grade school, they would perform with Ike and Margaret both on KMA and on the stage. In the mid-fifties when their sons finished high school, the older Everlys retired from the music business and Don and Phil decided to move to Nashville to try to take the family's country music tradition to the next level. Thanks in large part to their father's Music City contacts, the boys were immediately hired to play local clubs. In short order, their close harmonies caught the attention of several record labels and promoters. Columbia gave the Everlys a one-record tryout, but when that single flopped, the small Cadence Record Company stepped forward with an offer.

At about the same time that Don and Phil were making their move to Nashville, Boudleaux and Felice Bryant were preparing to make a move to the city's suburbs. Boudleaux, who had been named for a Frenchman that had saved his father's life in World War I, was born in Georgia. By the time he finished high school, the boy was not only a classical and jazz violinist, he also played piano, bass and sousaphone. Throughout his late teens and early twenties he performed with symphonies, jazz bands, country groups and pop combos. He excelled in chord structure and harmony.

While working a gig in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at the Schroeder Hotel, Boudleaux met a young woman named Felice Scaduto who was employed by the hotel as an elevator operator. It was love at first sight. After just five days they were married and within a few weeks the two had left Milwaukee. Boudleaux

continued playing small clubs, wherever the work would take him, and Felice would sometimes get bored alone at home, so she passed the time by writing little songs. While she didn't have the formal music training of her husband, Felice had grown up in a family which sang Italian folk songs and played instruments by ear. She had a natural feel for music and she also had a gift for writing poetry. The union of her innate strengths bore fruit in her songs.

Boudleaux had also been composing music for some time, and when he finally discovered that his wife was a better tunesmith than any of the musicians with whom he worked, he began to spend his Sundays writing with Felice. After a while he thought that some of their stuff sounded pretty good. After they had about eighty songs finished, the Bryants began writing letters seeking a publisher. Most of those letters were returned unopened. Then Boudleaux sent nationally-known radio and television personality Arthur Godfrey a piece they had written called "Country Boy." Godfrey liked it, but he wanted all publishing rights and co-credit as a writer, which nixed the deal.

In the meantime, the couple ventured to Cincinnati where they made contact with one of Boudleaux's old friends from his club-playing days, Rome Johnson. Johnson was acquainted with Fred Rose, head of Nashville's Acuff-Rose Publishing Company. Rose was also busy guiding the career of a new upstart in country music named Hank Williams, whose popularity was just beginning to break at the time. With Johnson's urging (and an introductory telephone call), the Bryants went to Nashville to meet with Rose. He also expressed an interest in "Country Boy" and offered Boudleaux and Felice a songwriter's contract on the spot, which they accepted. The song found its way to "Little" Jimmy Dickens, who logged his second top ten hit with it in the summer of 1949.

By 1956 the couple had composed scores of chart songs including "Out Behind The Barn" (another Dickens top ten), a couple of number ones: Red Foley's "Midnight," Carl Smith's "Hey Joe," (Frankie Laine's pop version of this tune sold over a million copies) and "How's The World Treating You" (a top five hit for Eddy Arnold). The royalties from these and many more releases had brought the Bryants their first taste of financial freedom. They could now live out many of their dreams, and one of the most important things they wanted to do was build a new home. They chose a wooded lot on Old Hickory Boulevard and hired a construction crew.

One day while driving out to inspect the builders' work, Boudleaux looked over to Felice and said that he had just come up with a terrific song idea for Johnnie & Jack. He told her what he had so far, and they started working on it together. By the time they got to the construction site, they had the song finished. It was called "Bye Bye Love." I suspect Boudleaux targeted Johnnie & Jack for the song because they already had scored a couple of big hits for RCA Victor with the word "love" in the title: "Poison Love" and "Ashes Of Love." A few days later, the Bryants showed "Bye Bye Love" to Johnnie Wright. He liked the song well enough, but claimed to already have all the songs they needed for their new album project. So that was that.

Cadence, an up-and-coming record label, was planning to add a country corner to its recording operation and "Bye Bye Love," in addition to several other Bryant songs, was sent to the company's head man Archie Bleyer. Archie was assigned to pick the music for the label's three country acts and he chose "Bye Bye Love" for the Everly Brothers. Employing the same country harmony style they had used since childhood, the boys' version had a slightly upbeat tempo, and didn't use a fiddle or a steel guitar (featuring instead the innovative playing of guitar virtuosos Hank Garland and Chet Atkins), but it was still a very country-sounding cut. Cadence didn't really know whether to market the record toward the pop market or the country market, so they ended up promoting it in both.

“Bye Bye Love” debuted on Billboard’s country singles chart on May 13, 1957 and began a steady climb. Two weeks later it appeared on the rock charts. The record reached the top of the country playlists on June 22nd where it would hold the #1 position for seven weeks. On the rock side, “Bye Bye Love” was a near-miss, peaking at #2 and maintaining that position for four weeks. Don & Phil’s very country-sounding song had become a major crossover hit, and therefore several acts were waiting in the wings to record their own versions of it. One of the most unlikely was honky-tonk’s Webb Pierce, who also notched a successful placement of “Bye Bye Love” on the Billboard country chart. Pierce’s rendition peaked at #7.

The Everlys’ first chart-topper set them up for even bigger things later in the year. For their second single, Don and Phil recorded another Bryant composition “Wake Up Little Suzie,” which skyrocketed to #1 on both charts simultaneously (four weeks in pop, eight weeks in country). Boudleaux and Felice then penned “Bird Dog,” “Devoted To You” and “All I Have To Do Is Dream” for the boys, all big hits. Over the next four years, the Everlys would become teen idols and the most successful “brother” act in show business. Screaming girls would greet them at concerts and their many national television appearances. Kids everywhere were singing their hits, and much of the credit for this success and acclaim had to go to the songwriting Bryants.

At the same time the Everlys were selling millions of records, their country harmony style was heavily influencing four lads from Britain. The Beatles would later admit that much of their sound came from trying to imitate Don and Phil’s special vocal blends. A host of other groups and singers borrowed from the boys too. Because of the major exposure the Everly Brothers received in the late-fifties and early-sixties rock/teen market, it is usually overlooked that the Everlys’ best chart numbers were earned on country playlists. Unlike so many other acts of this period who changed their sound to appeal to a broader rock base, Don and Phil simply did what they had always done.

With their simple, acoustic guitar licks, country harmonies and straightforward arrangements, all of the Everly Brothers’ songs reflected their rural roots. This seemed to be proven as much of their material was later revived by other artists. When these tunes all reappeared as hits, they were redone by country acts and achieved high chart placements almost exclusively on country playlists. The successful cover versions (in addition to the aforementioned Webb Pierce rendition of “Bye Bye Love”) include “All I Have To Do Is Dream” (by Glen Campbell & Bobbie Gentry in 1970), “(Til) I Kissed You” (by Connie Smith in 1976), “So Sad (To Watch Good Love Go Bad)” (by Hank Williams, Jr. & Lois Johnson in 1970, Connie Smith in 1976 and Emmylou Harris in 1983), “Walk Right Back” (by Anne Murray in 1978), “Crying In The Rain” (by Tammy Wynette in 1981) and “Cathy’s Clown” (by Reba McEntire in 1989).

Thus, during country music’s most confused period of the late 1950s, when young, new acts were being accused of ruining the genre, the Everly Brothers took country music’s traditional influence and helped spread it around the world. Along the way they also greatly helped Boudleaux and Felice Bryant live many more of their dreams and earn shoo-in inductions into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1972 and the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1991, a rare accomplishment for non-performing songwriters. The Everly Brothers achieved their own election to the Country Music Hall of Fame ten years later, in 2001. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Before The Next Teardrop Falls"
(written by Vivian Keith and Ben Peters)

Duane Dee (#44, 1968)
Linda Martell (#33, 1970)
Freddy Fender (#1 country, #1 pop, 1975)

During the latter part of the 1960s, Ben Peters worked as a professional manager for Fingerlake Music Publishing Company in Nashville and, at the time, he shuffled his paperwork through a secretary named Vivian Keith. In addition to doing office work, Peters was writing songs for the company (including a number one Eddy Arnold record, "Turn The World Around"), and one evening Vivian suggested he do something around the title "Before The Next Tear Falls." Ben agreed to the project. He went home and wrote most of the song that night, finishing it up the next day. He adjusted the title ever so slightly, calling it "Before The Next Teardrop Falls."

Long before Freddy Fender got hold of it, "Before The Next Teardrop Falls" had already earned a rather long history. Duane Dee had cut it for Capitol Records in 1968, but he was drafted for military service while the record was in release and it peaked on Billboard's country chart at #44. Another version landed at #33 for Linda Martell in 1970. A total of 32 people eventually recorded the song before Fender came up with the definitive version.

Ironically, Freddy Fender (real name: Baldemar Garza Huerta) didn't want to cut the song at all. A relative unknown, his forte was the regional "Tejano Rock" and "Swamp Pop" music of Southern Louisiana and Southeast Texas. He was recording an album of this music in September of 1974 when producer Huey Meaux approached him with the instrumental tracks to "Before The Next Teardrop Falls" already recorded. All Fender had to do was supply the vocals, taking only a few minutes of his precious time. Freddy was adamantly opposed to doing anything country, but he obliged Meaux just to get it out of the way. That was what motivated him. He thought, "Well, as soon as I get through with this, I can get back to some real music."

Fender's recording of "Before The Next Teardrop Falls" first appeared on Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart on January 11, 1975 at #96 – the worst debut ever for a future number one record – but it gained momentum and landed at the summit on March 15th. Eleven weeks after reaching #1 on the country chart, the record also topped the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart on May 31, 1975. In between, it was certified gold on May 22nd by the Recording Industry Association of America for sales of one million copies and won the CMA "Single of the Year" award that fall. "Before The Next Teardrop Falls" holds a rare distinction of being one of only seven records during the 1970s to reach #1 on both the country and pop charts (the others are Charlie Rich's "The Most Beautiful Girl" in 1973, Billy Swan's "I Can Help" in 1974, Glen Campbell's "Rhinestone Cowboy" in 1975, two by John Denver also in '75: "Thank God I'm A Country Boy" and "I'm Sorry," and C. W. McCall's "Convoy" in 1976).

Fender's first hit set him on the road with bookings for the next three years. During his brief time in the country spotlight, he scored eight Top Ten country hits, including four number one singles. Then it was back to the career where his heart and soul really was: "Tejano Rock" and "Swamp Pop" music, which he performed until nearly the end of his life. Nonetheless, as he was dying from cancer in 2006, it was Fender's oft-expressed desire to become the first Mexican-American to be inducted into the Country

Music Hall of Fame. In this era of political correctness, a posthumous induction is a possibility, but does his work in country music actually warrant this? I think not, but we shall see. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Smoke On The Water"
(written by Zeke Clements and Earl Nunn)

Red Foley (#1 country, #7 pop, 1944)
Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys (#1, 1945)
Boyd Heath (#7, 1945)

Zeke Clements came to the Grand Ole Opry in the 1930s as one of the first western singers to be welcomed on the show. Decked out in flashy cowboy outfits, he was a crowd favorite but in spite of this, he never placed any of his recordings on the national pop or country charts. Still, of all the country music old-timers, he is the performer whose voice has probably been heard by more children than any other. In the 1937 Disney classic, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," Clements supplied the voice of Bashful. Zeke also wrote several hits for a host of artists. Eddy Arnold scored big in 1948 with Clements' "Just A Little Lovin' (Will Go A Long Way)." That release camped out at the top of Billboard's country charts for eight weeks. Yet, Zeke's most-inspired strike occurred five years earlier. "Smoke On The Water," a 1943 Clements composition, would not only launch the career of one of country, gospel and pop music's most beloved stars, it would also become one of World War II's most important songs.

The war years were a unique time in American music. With so many soldiers stationed all over the world, and with so many people from vastly different cultures thrown together in a random fashion, our nation was in the midst of a massive and very direct information exchange. Men from the Deep South were swapping stories and songs with guys from New York City. Chicago boys were trading guitar licks with Texans. In the thirties the Okies had migrated to California and taken their music with them, thus spreading a sound that would evolve into the Bakersfield version of country. Now, with the war going on, hillbilly music was being taken around the world, and for that reason its influence was spreading faster than ever before.

It is quickly obvious when listening to records from that era that country music writers felt the war deeply and personally. They had relatives and friends who were wading ashore on Pacific islands or battling Hitler's forces in Europe. Many of them had been injured or died. This emotion flooded out in such songs as "A Soldier's Last Letter," "Mail Call Today," "Stars and Stripes on Iwo Jima," "The White Cross on Okinawa," and many more releases pertaining to World War II. These tunes served double-duty, and the writers and performers knew it. The music was used to build morale, not only on the home front, but overseas as well. In many cases country songs became the themes for units. Hillbilly song titles were often chosen as the names for bombers. While country music was certainly not the only musical form to embrace the subject of war, the genre's writers seemed to relate to it in a more personal and meaningful manner.

Like so many others, Zeke Clements was deeply concerned by the death and dying which were part of the worldwide conflict. It was a time that tested faith. As millions did, Zeke often turned to the Bible and

prayer for a source of comfort. On one dark night in 1943, when the horrors of war seemed so very close, a haunting vision hit the songwriter and would not let him go. Clements had come upon a Bible passage saying God had put a rainbow in the sky, which Zeke took as meaning that the world would not again be destroyed by water. The next time it would be destroyed by fire, he reasoned, feeling strongly that it was possible the war would consume the world with fire as the Bible had predicted. With the image of World War II setting the world on fire fresh in his mind, Clements asked his friend Earl Nunn for assistance in writing a song about it. The two men composed words that were meant only for this one moment in the grand scale of time: the duration of the war. They called their new song "Smoke On The Water." Immediately after Clements premiered the number, several artists lined up to record their own versions of it. The first single to make the charts was by a thirty-three-year-old Kentucky native, Red Foley.

Foley had been in the entertainment business since college. A veteran of both the WLS Barn Dance and the National Barn Dance in Chicago, he had spent a decade singing with a number of different groups. Foley was the first country artist to host a network radio program, NBC's "Avalon Time" in 1939 (his co-host was comedian Red Skelton). During the early years, the spotlight had rarely fallen on his great talent as a solo vocalist but on one of the few occasions that it did, Foley caught the attention of Decca Records. Executives from the label were impressed enough to offer him a lifetime contract in 1941. His first release was "Old Shep," a piece Foley had written in 1933 about a dog he had owned as a boy (although in real life, the dog's name was "Hoover"). Even though this record didn't make the national pop charts (country charts didn't come into existence until 1944), the number became a highly-acclaimed classic, in the ensuing years being famously performed by Elvis Presley and countless others.

Three years later, Decca matched Foley with "Smoke On The Water." The release debuted August 26, 1944 on Billboard's new country chart (initially called "Best-Selling Folk Retail Records") and made Billboard's pop listings the following month, eventually peaking at #7. However, its major impact was on the country chart, where it spent an impressive thirteen weeks at #1, making Red Foley's "Smoke On The Water" the twenty-seventh biggest country record of all time. Decca used Foley's first chart-topper, plus his move to Nashville and Grand Ole Opry stardom, to groom him into one of the nation's premier recording artists. Red covered Spade Cooley's recent number one "Shame On You," and reached the top spot with it as well. More than a dozen other huge releases followed, including Foley's signature song, the mega-hit "Chattanoogie Shoe Shine Boy," one of the first significant records to feature guitarist Grady Martin, who later became a member of Nashville's celebrated "A-Team" group of musicians. This tune spent thirteen weeks atop Billboard's country chart and eight weeks at #1 on the pop listings. Yet, despite the tremendous success of "Chattanoogie Shoe Shine Boy," it was Foley's first charted effort, "Smoke On The Water," that proved to be the biggest of his sixty-five Billboard placements.

Overseas, "Smoke On The Water" became a password for certain Marine groups, as well as the inspiration for many soldiers caught in the midst of kamikaze raids and close fighting. For years after World War II finally came to an end, songwriter Clements received letters from war veterans telling him how his song had inspired them to continue fighting when they were convinced that they could take no more. The war had been a special time for America. It was an occasion when a nation banded together to contribute to paying freedom's high price. Zeke Clements' contribution was born in a vision and reached its zenith in a song. World War II is long over, but "Smoke On The Water" remains as a testament to how much so many gave to make the song's message ring true. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Sixteen Tons"
(written by Merle Travis)

Tennessee Ernie Ford (#1 country, #1 pop, 1955)
Johnny Desmond (#17 pop, 1955)

One of country music's most creative forces was born in Rosewood, Kentucky in 1917. Merle Robert Travis, the son of a poor, banjo-playing mine worker, grew up in the middle of coal country. He lived most of his youth in a rental house that had no running water or electricity. The Travis's landlords and best friends had been slaves until after the Civil War. Life was hard, times were tough, and the only joy the family could afford was the music they made on hand-me-down instruments. By the time he had reached the age of eight, Merle was plucking a five-string banjo and a homemade guitar. After local Pentecostal meetings, the boy would stay late just so Ike Everly (Don and Phil's father), the church's best guitar picker, could teach Merle new chords. Young Travis soon mastered Everly's style of thumb and finger picking and began to add to it. Long before he left school in the eighth grade, Merle was known as one of the area's best musicians.

In a peculiar irony, the Depression actually improved Merle's life. By enlisting and working in the Civilian and Conservation Corps, Travis made enough money to purchase a Gretsch guitar. Teaming with other members of his CCC group, Merle formed a band and worked the streets for nickels and dimes. This eventually led to a radio job in Evansville, Indiana. By World War II, the guitar player had moved up to 50,000 watt WLW-AM in Cincinnati. In less than a decade he had escaped the mines and was making good money playing music. The boy who had once been lucky just to get patched up hand-me-downs was now purchasing shirts off the rack and driving his own car. Then the Marines called him. Merle continued to play music during his service stint, and after the war, he secured a West Coast movie job with Tex Ritter. By the middle of 1946, Travis was recording for Capitol and on his way to producing a long string of hit records. The biggest, "Divorce Me C. O. D.," held the #1 position on the country charts for fourteen weeks.

Cliffie Stone, one of the A&R men at Capitol, thought that Merle had pop potential. Stone suggested to the label's executives that the best way to break Travis through to a larger audience might be to emulate folk singer Burl Ives. There was a catch, however. Stone didn't want Merle to sing modern versions of old folk songs. He wanted the singer to write new, original folk ballads. Even though the idea failed to stir Travis's imagination, he went along with it. If the label wanted him to write folk songs, then Merle was going to give it a try. After listening to a number of folk recordings, Merle sat down and began to write. Drawing from the experiences of his youth, Merle came up with several new working-type songs, but he didn't personally like any of them. He felt that none of the compositions were really inspired, nor did he think they had any commercial possibilities. He told Cliffie Stone that they were "nothing more than a lot of junk." When none of the new tunes charted, his point seemed to be proven. Soon the record label let Merle get back to writing in a country style and all the talk about folk music was dropped. It was probably a wise move, as over the next few years Travis turned out a number of country classics including "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed" and "Steel Guitar Rag."

At about the time that Merle Travis was trying to write folk music, a Tennessee-born disc jockey and World War II veteran was becoming a well-known voice in San Bernardino, California. Not only could the man tell great stories between record spins, but he had a powerful, deep singing voice. Cliffie Stone

noticed Ernest Ford's baritone, and soon learned that the young man had been trained at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. At the time when Eddy Arnold and George Morgan were crossing over onto pop charts, Ford's combination of country manners and smooth, disciplined voice seemed perfectly suited for the marketplace. In 1949, Stone signed Ford to a record deal and brought him into Hollywood's Capitol studio. Over the course of the next six years, the singer (now known as "Tennessee Ernie" Ford) notched seventeen hits on Billboard's country charts, with several of his songs crossing over to the pop side. One of those records, "Mule Train," stayed at #1 for a month in country and went to #9 in pop. Ironically, "Mule Train" had been one of Merle Travis's compositions from the writer's folk efforts, which he had considered "junk." Unlike Merle, Ernie loved the feel of Travis's folk songs. As he listened to the old recordings, one of the numbers really stood out. Back in the studio, Ford concentrated on putting together a dynamic but simple clarinet-driven pop arrangement to Merle's "Sixteen Tons." Beginning with Ernie's snapping fingers, the story of a miner who couldn't get ahead was slowly built. In Ford's strong voice, the tale came to life. Millions who had never been close to a coal mine, or who didn't have the slightest idea what a "company store" was, would be quickly drawn in. Even in the studio as they listened to the playback, the musicians felt a miner's pain and frustrations. Everyone agreed that this was a powerful record.

"Sixteen Tons" hit Billboard's country charts in November, 1955, and just one month later, on December 17th, it would land at the #1 plateau and hold that position for ten weeks. Ernie's record would also cross over to the pop playlists and reach the summit there as well, locked in for eight weeks. As late as 1990, "Sixteen Tons" was still ranked as one of the twenty-five top songs of the modern pop era. Thanks to the coal-mining record, Tennessee Ernie Ford had moved into the upper echelon of entertainment. NBC gave him a morning television show, and soon spun that off into a prime-time variety series. He became a spokesman for the Ford Motor Company, and was used by a long line of other advertisers. After the phenomenal success of "Sixteen Tons," Ernie was a major star, and would stay an important entertainer for the rest of his life. He was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1990.

As the years passed, Merle Travis would also come to be appreciated. Travis would be honored time and time again for his songwriting, acting, singing and guitar-playing. His election to the Country Music Hall of Fame occurred in 1977, thirteen years before Ford was inducted. Merle's talents, especially his innovative prowess on the guitar, proved to be highly influential to many musicians, including the great Chet Atkins. As a songwriter, most of the accolades that had come Travis's way were due in large part to "Sixteen Tons," the quirky little folk song that Merle considered "junk" which Tennessee Ernie Ford had turned into a smash hit. In dozens of interviews over the years about the song, Travis would explain that there was very little in it that was written seriously. Nothing was realistic about it, he said. No man could load a ton of coal in a day. A baby couldn't pick up a shovel and head to the mine the day he was born. However, one of the song's key lines was somewhat true. As a child, Merle picked up some of the conversation around the mines during the Depression, and when the miners would be asked how they were doing, they would answer, "I can't afford to die, I owe my soul to the company store." One of his dad's favorite sayings was "another day older and deeper in debt" and Merle worked that line into the song's narrative as well. But Travis always insisted that "Sixteen Tons" wasn't meant to be a serious piece. It was intended as a "fun" song.

Fun song or not, "Sixteen Tons" led to several investigations (the most notable one headed by CBS's premier reporter Edward R. Murrow) which revealed the terrible conditions many miners faced daily, and how major coal companies had long taken advantage of their workers. Through the new medium of television, the plight of millions of forgotten miners was shown in graphic detail. These reports covered everything, from black lung disease, to abject poverty, to the tragedy of those who died in unsafe

conditions. So “Sixteen Tons” did much more than just make stars out of two men. It helped generate a nation’s awareness that led a move toward major mining reforms. Through these actions, “Sixteen Tons” also began to reveal the power of country music to affect social change. On March 25, 2015 Tennessee Ernie Ford’s original 1955 release was selected for induction into the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry, the highest honor a recording can achieve. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“You’re The Reason God Made Oklahoma”
(written by Larry Collins and Sandy Pinkard)

David Frizzell and Shelly West (#1, 1981)

David Frizzell and Shelly West titled their first album “Carryin’ On The Family Names.” It was appropriate: David was the younger brother of legendary country music star Lefty Frizzell, and Shelly called Dottie West “Mom.” Family also played a role in their development. Shelly sang back-up on the road with Dottie from 1975 to 1977 where she met Allen Frizzell, a band member and brother to Lefty and David. Allen and Shelly became an item and headed to California in 1978, where they teamed up with David and worked two years in nightclubs. Jack Brumley, brother of Tom Brumley (a former member of Buck Owens’ band, the Buckaroos) signed them to a management contract, and then approached record producer Snuff Garrett, who loved the whole family concept. He asked Larry Collins and Sandy Pinkard to write a special song for David and Shelly to cut as a duet. They returned with “You’re The Reason God Made Oklahoma.”

Frizzell & West recorded that one, as well as several more tunes that Garrett had assembled, enough to make a complete album. Snuff had a distribution deal going with Casablanca West, but unfortunately, just after all the work had been done, that company dissolved. So David & Shelly were stuck with a finished album with no way to market it. That was in January of 1980. After exhausting all possibilities in Los Angeles, producer Garrett headed east to Nashville to shop it around there, but was rebuffed by every major label. Dejected, he returned to the West coast, where he and Steve Dorff were assigned to work on the soundtrack for a new Clint Eastwood movie called “Any Which Way You Can” (the follow-up to the 1979 box-office hit “Every Which Way But Loose”). In preparing for the project, Garrett played “You’re The Reason God Made Oklahoma” for Eastwood, who asserted “That’s a pistol.” At Clint’s direction, the song was included in the movie, coming over a truck radio.

West remembers that David just knew that it was going to be a massive hit, and she was plenty nervous. Because if he was right, that would mean they would be playing to big audiences, and Shelly was really scared at first. Frizzell’s prediction did come true. Garrett revived his long-dormant Viva Records and released the soundtrack album in late 1980, even before the film’s December 12th premiere. Four singles were released ahead of “You’re The Reason God Made Oklahoma” but, beginning with KGEN in Tulare, California, radio stations all over the country started playing it off the soundtrack. Viva issued it as a single, Warner Brothers picked up the master, and the song that no one wanted rocketed to #1 on April 11, 1981. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"The Long Black Veil"
(written by Danny Dill and Marijohn Wilkin)

Lefty Frizzell (#6, 1959)
Sammi Smith (#26, 1974)

Songwriter Danny Dill walked into his office at Cedarwood Publishing Company with a poem. At the time, Cedarwood's staff of writers consisted of Dill, along with Marijohn Wilkin, Mel Tillis, Wayne Walker, John D. Loudermilk and Fred Burch. Danny walked in and handed the poem to Wilkin. She tweaked the lyrics a bit, put a melody to it, and then they recorded a demo. The demo had a taker right away: Columbia Records A & R director Don Law. He was looking for a good song for one of the artists in his stable who was in the midst of a long dry spell, hit-wise. It was one of the most influential artists in country music history, Lefty Frizzell. During the early 1950s, Lefty had literally burned up the Billboard country charts. At one point in 1951, he had four of the nation's top ten records on the chart at the same time! However, the hit supply had dried up by 1954, and he desperately needed a good one to give his career a much needed shot in the arm. "The Long Black Veil" was a distinctive departure from his previous "honky tonk" style and a deliberate move toward the popularity at that time of "folk" type material and the burgeoning "Nashville Sound." The record proved successful, and briefly put Frizzell back on the map again.

Next to her gospel classic "One Day At A Time," "The Long Black Veil" is considered to be Marijohn Wilkin's greatest work. She won a BMI award for it in 1959 just after Lefty's record became a Top Ten hit. In a 1975 interview, Danny Dill discussed his inspiration for "The Long Black Veil" with author Dorothy Horstman. He told her that the song consisted of three elements that had interested him for years. A Catholic priest had been murdered in New Jersey many years earlier under a town hall light, and, although there were no less than 50 witnesses, the killer was never caught and the case remained unsolved. Dill then drew upon the legend of a mysterious woman who visited actor Rudolph Valentino's grave every year on his birthdate. She always wore a long, black veil. The last component was Red Foley's classic gospel number "God Walks These Hills With Me," which Danny had always considered a great song, and he worked that in as well. The final result was quite unique, even for a country song: a love story, a murder mystery and a ghost story all rolled up in one neat little package.

"The Long Black Veil" has been recorded by dozens of artists over the years, most recently by Rosanne Cash, who included it on her 2009 CD "The List," based on a list of 100 essential country songs that her father, Johnny Cash, had given to her when she was 18 years old in order to expand her knowledge of country music. Rosanne culled that list of 100 down to twelve for the CD project. For "The Long Black Veil," she took the liberty of putting in a few extra chords and adding a rock beat. We'll never know how Dill, Frizzell or Wilkin (all deceased) would have felt about that, but Marijohn's son Buck Wilkin considers Rosanne's version his favorite. As for me, the 1959 Lefty Frizzell original can't be touched. Lefty's haunting voice, the marvelous guitar work by Grady Martin (playing Frizzell's own 1949 Gibson Model SJ-200 guitar on the session), and Don Law's nifty production technique (adding just the right amount of echo), made that record into the classic it is. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Sweet Dreams"
(written by Don Gibson)

Faron Young (#2, 1956)
Don Gibson - MGM (#9, 1956)
Don Gibson – RCA Victor (#6, 1961)
Patsy Cline (#5 country, #44 pop, 1963)
Emmylou Harris (#1, 1976)
Reba McEntire (#19, 1979)

By the time Don Gibson landed his first break as a performer, he was still in his teens, and it was a big break indeed: as a featured member of the prestigious Tennessee Barn Dance on WNOX Radio in Knoxville, Tennessee. Quite an accomplishment for a youngster, and he made the most of it. Over the next few years, Gibson earned a reputation as one of East Tennessee's most-talented and most-popular young performers. He had taken an interest in songwriting as well, and had been signed to a recording contract by MGM, although the label wasn't promoting him very much. A major characteristic that set Don apart from most other young people was his tremendous drive that constantly pressured him to push forward and reach for bigger and better things in his music career. One afternoon at WNOX, Gibson felt himself to be in somewhat of a rut, despite all the local acclaim he had achieved. He decided to lock himself in an upstairs office at the station and write his way to fame. Believing that he could shape ideas into songs, he worked on the beginnings of something he would soon call "Sweet Dreams." At first, he used nothing more than a guitar and the C, D7 and G7 chords. The words came later. By the time "Sweet Dreams" was finished, Gibson felt he had something that might take him to the big time. He recorded the tune for MGM. The label released it and WNOX began playing Don's cut. The trick now was to get some influential person to notice.

That person turned out to be Wesley Rose, head of Acuff-Rose Publishing, at the time Nashville's most important music publishing company. Rose caught Don's recording of "Sweet Dreams" on the radio and drove to Knoxville to meet him. In an old mobile home, the two men talked about "Sweet Dreams" and the other pieces Gibson had written, as well as the young man's longtime desire to become a recording star in country music's major leagues. Rose offered to buy the rights to a few of Don's originals, but the songwriter wouldn't sell unless Wesley could get Gibson a recording contract with a label that would fully back him, which he felt that MGM was not doing. Only after Rose promised to do all he could to grant this request did Don agree to transfer the publishing rights to "Sweet Dreams" and his other songs to Acuff-Rose.

After Rose started shopping Don's songs around Nashville and searching for another label for him, MGM finally realized that Gibson had potential and began to promote "Sweet Dreams" in earnest, hoping to get a big hit for him so he wouldn't bolt the company and sign with another label. But it was too late. Even though Don's record of "Sweet Dreams" did eventually achieve top ten status (peaking at #9), he had already made up his mind to leave, and Wesley did come through with his promise to find him a new label. It turned out to be the biggest and the best: RCA Victor.

Even before Gibson's version of "Sweet Dreams" debuted on Billboard's country singles chart in August of 1956, the song had been picked up and recorded by Faron Young. His record preceded Don's by one month. It took off fast and stayed solid, remaining on the chart for thirty-three weeks, peaking at #2.

Acuff-Rose, now the publisher of the tune, was especially pleased by Faron Young's near chart-topping finish. Not only did it mean a tremendous windfall for the company financially, but with this song, the word had gotten out about Don Gibson's prowess as a songwriter, and as Wesley Rose had hoped, the publisher was soon fielding legions of inquiries from Nashville's top artists and producers wanting to know what else this Gibson boy had written.

Foreseeing a potential star in Gibson, RCA signed him immediately after he fulfilled the obligations of his MGM contract. At RCA the sky was the limit, and Don capitalized on the opportunity. His first hit right out of the chute was "Oh, Lonesome Me," the first song recorded at RCA's brand new Nashville facility, which began operation in November of 1957. "Oh Lonesome Me" (b/w "I Can't Stop Loving You") sailed to #1 and held that position for eight weeks. Over the course of the next three years, Gibson would score a dozen hits for his new label.

While Don was urged to keep writing fresh material, RCA saw even further possibilities for Gibson's first chart song. Five years after its initial release, RCA wanted to get its own version of "Sweet Dreams" on the market, so in 1961 Don was brought into the studio to cut a new version of the tune. The label's hunch was correct and the second time around, "Sweet Dreams" finished a few notches higher on the chart than the original MGM release, topping out at #6. By this time, Gibson believed that his first hit would be put to rest for good. He certainly didn't expect it to become a major hit again anytime soon. So it must have surprised him greatly when he discovered that Patsy Cline had recorded "Sweet Dreams" at what would prove to be her final session on February 2, 1963, about a month before her fatal plane crash. By May, Patsy's posthumous rendition of "Sweet Dreams" was soaring up the chart, finishing at #5. In later years, the tune became so associated with Cline that a 1985 movie about her life (starring Jessica Lange as Patsy) was given the song's title.

Thirteen years after Patsy Cline's version, "Sweet Dreams" turned up on the charts again, this time destined for a #1 landing. Emmylou Harris was at the end of her first Hot Band tour when she grouped some talented musicians into a studio and cut her last album for the Reprise label. Besides three of Elvis Presley's best pickers, former Eagle Bernie Leadon and future star Rodney Crowell joined Emmylou for the session. "Sweet Dreams" had long been one of Harris's favorite songs, and she loved singing it live. She wanted this record to reflect both her feelings for Don Gibson's composition and the energy which drove her in concerts. Emmylou's version was released in October, 1976 and two months later became her second #1 single. Over twenty years after Gibson had written this classic, the song finally felt the rare air at the top of Billboard's country chart.

Even after five stellar chart runs, Nashville wasn't quite finished with "Sweet Dreams." Reba McEntire, a newcomer at the time, first tasted the top twenty with the classic in 1979. Like Emmylou Harris, Reba had always loved the tune, and as a tribute to Patsy Cline, would always close each of her concerts with it. This practice abruptly stopped after McEntire's band died in the same tragic fashion as Cline. After the plane crash, Reba vowed never to perform "Sweet Dreams" again. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"True Love Ways"
(written by Norman Petty & Buddy Holly)

Peter & Gordon (#14 pop, 1965)
Mickey Gilley (#1 country, #66 pop, 1980)

A new decade brought a new approach to Mickey Gilley's recording career. After gaining a national foothold – and seven number one records – with material that mirrored his cousin Jerry Lee Lewis, Gilley hooked up with a brand new producer, secured by his publicists, the Brokaw Company. Jim Ed Norman's very first hit as a producer came with "Right Time Of The Night," a Jennifer Warnes single that reached #5 on Billboard's Hot 100 pop chart and #17 on the country chart in 1977. It was Norman who helped revitalize Anne Murray's career, and he also saw a chance to pump new life into Gilley's recording efforts as well.

Norman encouraged Gilley to take more time in the studio, and to explore his potential as a balladeer. Mickey introduced the new sound with "True Love Ways," a song co-written and first recorded by the late Buddy Holly. Buddy had written it specifically for his wife Maria. She came to one of Mickey's concerts in Dallas and met with him backstage, saying that she considered Gilley's version of "True Love Ways" the best cut that anybody had ever done on the tune. It was a very special song to her, because that was the record that was out when Buddy was killed in a plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa on February 3, 1959. Surprisingly, Holly's recording of "True Love Ways" never charted.

When Gilley's version was released, a Dallas disc jockey took an interest in the similarities of both recordings and through advanced technology, he was able to develop a composite that featured portions of each cut (although the project wasn't placed in general release). It was very advantageous that Mickey's rendition was in the same key and basically the same tempo as Holly's original, so a suitable "duet" of "True Love Ways" could be created through overdubbing, which by then was pretty common. In the mid-1960s a couple of full albums utilizing this process had been made with Hank Williams, Jr. dubbing his voice into some of his dad's old hits, creating "father and son" duets. The same idea was successfully done with a few of Jim Reeves' old masters with Deborah Allen, who was only eleven years old when Reeves died, serving as Jim's duet partner and three of these singles reached Top Ten status. Mickey still felt it was "eerie" to be singing with Buddy Holly on "True Love Ways."

Holly's name never appeared on Billboard's country charts, although several of his rock hits such as "Peggy Sue" and "That'll Be The Day" have since been embraced by country radio as "golden oldies." Susie Allanson, whose career as a hit-maker spanned only a couple of years in the late '70s, scored one of her four Top Ten hits with a cover of one of Buddy Holly's best-known tunes, "Maybe Baby." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

”Honey”
(written by Bobby Russell)

Bobby Goldsboro (#1 country, #1 pop, 1968)

Before 1968, Bobby Goldsboro had never appeared on the country chart. A one-time member of Roy Orbison’s band, he gained his first hit as a solo performer in 1964 with “See The Funny Little Clown,” a self-penned single that reached number nine on the pop chart. However, Bobby failed to return to the Top Ten until 1968, when “Honey” went to number one on both the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart, as well as that publication’s country chart.

Goldsboro and producer Bob Montgomery had to make a deal to record the song in the first place. The composer of “Honey,” Bobby Russell, had produced a cut of it with former Kingston Trio member Bob Shane, and Russell only allowed Goldsboro and Montgomery to record it with a strict agreement that it couldn’t be released without Russell’s approval, and until Shane’s record finished its run.

The session at which Goldsboro recorded “Honey” took place in Nashville on the evening of January 30, 1968 at Music City Music Hall (RCA Studio A). Montgomery later told Jim Bickhart of Billboard Magazine, “We cut it perfectly on the very first take. Everyone looked as each other as if to say ‘Is that it? Did we miss something?’ We all knew the first cut was perfect, but we did it again just to be sure and it came out just as good the second time, so we went with the second take.” In a rare occurrence, all of the musicians stayed around long enough to hear the playback in the control room. Pianist Larry Butler (who years later would gain fame as Kenny Rogers’ producer) recalled, “all of us who played that night knew that “Honey” was going to be a huge record. In fact, most of us called our wives at home so we could play it for them over the phone.”

Bob Shane’s record (on the Decca label) was still in release though, and Montgomery had to stick by his agreement to keep the Goldsboro version “in the can” until writer Bobby Russell gave the green light to issue it. According to Montgomery, the promotions man at Decca (Bob Holiday) who had been assigned to work Shane’s record, phoned him and said “if you call Russell right now, he’ll tell you to go ahead and issue Goldsboro’s recording because he’s mad at Decca over something,” (in reality, he was probably more mad at Holiday than the label, because Shane’s version of “Honey” was going nowhere). So Montgomery called him and sure enough, Russell angrily said “I don’t give a **** what you do.”

So “Honey,” this time by Bobby Goldsboro, was rush-released on the United Artists label and, within its first three weeks on the market, sold a million copies, on its way to global sales of well over six million. It was the biggest-selling record world-wide for the entire year of 1968 in all fields of music, and was one of only four records to reach the number one position on both the country and pop charts during the entire decade of the 1960s. The dawn of the decade saw the first one, Marty Robbins’ “El Paso” in January of 1960. Then Jimmy Dean’s “Big Bad John” topped both playlists in the fall of ’61 and Jeannie C. Riley’s “Harper Valley PTA” matched Goldsboro’s accomplishment in 1968. As for Bobby, he had only one other Top Ten record during the remaining years of his career: 1971’s “Watching Scotty Grow,” which made it to #7 only on Billboard’s country chart, but he never again scored another Top Ten pop hit after “Honey.” – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"I Can Tell By The Way You Dance (You're Gonna Love Me Tonight)"
(written by Sandy Pinkard and Rob Strandlund)

Vern Gosdin (#1, 1984)

In today's world, one of the nation's most popular television programs is titled "The Voice," a show that spotlights amateur performers singing in competition. It's very much along the same lines as "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour" and "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts" programs from the 1950s. But thirty years ago, if you heard someone refer to "The Voice," the person was talking about one of country music's most talented vocalists, Vern Gosdin, a man Tammy Wynette once described as "the only singer able to hold a candle to George Jones." The press dubbed him "The Voice" because of his uncanny ability to deliver song lyrics with unbelievably gut-wrenching emotion. Gosdin came by this skill naturally, because many of his songs were written around his own unhappy personal life. Divorced three times, most of his 25 Top Twenty hits between 1977 and 1991 he co-wrote based around those sad incidents. His crowning achievement, the all-time great tearjerker "Chiseled In Stone," was honored by the Country Music Association as 1989's "Song of the Year."

Born August 5, 1934 in Woodland, Alabama, Vern was the sixth of nine children. On Saturday nights, he went to sleep to the sounds of the Grand Ole Opry, dreaming that one day he might take the stage himself. In his teens, Gosdin and his two brothers applied their family harmonies on a gospel radio program at 50,000 watt WVOK in Birmingham. After that first experience in music, Vern moved to Chicago where he managed the "D & G Tap" club (Buford Pusser, later the inspiration for the "Walking Tall" movies, was the club's bouncer). Gosdin relocated to California in 1960 and along with his brother Rex, formed a bluegrass group called the Golden State Boys. Chris Hillman was a member of the band, and when he became its leader, the group changed its name to "The Hillmen." After Chris joined "The Byrds, he cut Vern's song "Someone To Turn To," which found its way onto the soundtrack of the Jack Nicholson cult film "Easy Rider."

The Gosdin Brothers opened shows for the Byrds for a while after that, but after releasing three singles which failed to spark any interest, Gosdin quit the music business and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, founding his own glass and mirror company. He was able to support himself by working only nine hours per week. Music still called, however, and Vern shelled out $8,000 of his own money to re-record solo versions of a couple of the songs he and Rex had released on the West coast several years earlier: "Hangin' On" and "Yesterday's Gone." After hearing the demo tape, Emmylou Harris was impressed enough to ask Vern if she could add harmony vocals on these tracks. Both releases made the Top Twenty in 1977 for Electra Records (#16 and #9 respectively).

Moving from label to label, Gosdin was able to consistently place records in the upper numbers on Billboard's country singles chart, even though the independent companies he was making records for didn't have very large promotional departments to speak of. Still, a cover of another of his and Rex's old recordings, "Till The End" (with background harmonies by Janie Fricke), became a Top Ten hit, as did "Dream Of Me" (#7), "If You're Gonna Do Me Wrong (Do It Right)" (#5), a country version of The Association's old '67 pop hit "Never My Love" (#9) and "Way Down Deep" (#5). Finally, "The Voice" scored the first of his three number one hits with a song he had held onto for over two years, "I Can Tell By The Way You Dance (You're Gonna Love Me Tonight)." Gary Morris had recorded the tune, but

hadn't released it as a single, opening the door for a Gosdin issue. Still, Vern shied away from the number, concerned that it "rocked too much" for his straight country delivery.

One day at a session, his producer Blake Mevis decided he wanted to record Gosdin doing something uptempo for a change and asked him if he had anything. It was then that Vern finally brought out "I Can Tell By The Way You Dance (You're Gonna Love Me Tonight)." After the single reached #1 on Billboard's country singles chart on June 30, 1984, Mevis explained that he requested the change of direction for Vern because, even though he was noted for his ballads, an area in which he felt the most comfortable, Blake wanted Gosdin to stretch out some. He wanted people to say, "I didn't know Vern could sing like that." Mevis said, "It's like buying a suit. You don't want to buy a blue pin-striped suit if you've already got one in the closet." Well, "I Can Tell By The Way You Dance (You're Gonna Love Me Tonight)" was indeed a nice change of pace for Vern, but his voice was made for ballads, and (with a couple of exceptions) he stuck to that style of singing for the remainder of his recording career, including his peak years on the Columbia label which were yet to come. – JH

The Stories Behind The Songs:

"All The Time"
(written by Mel Tillis & Wayne Walker)

Kitty Wells (#18, 1959)
Jack Greene (#1, 1967)

"You Are My Treasure"
(written by Cindy Walker)

Jack Greene (#1, 1968)

"All The Time" and "You Are My Treasure" marked Jack Greene's second and third #1 hits. "There Goes My Everything" (its backstory previously appearing here on Classic Country Music Stories) had become Greene's first chart-topper in December of 1966. Written by Dallas Frazier, Jack's first wife had insisted that he record it. The Jordanaires helped Greene adjust the melody on the last line, and on the third take, they achieved the desired results. "There Goes My Everything" went for a seven-week ride in the #1 position on Billboard's country singles chart. Six months later, Greene followed it up by re-working a Mel Tillis/Wayne Walker composition called "All The Time." Decca's Owen Bradley had produced the first version of the song for Kitty Wells in 1959, which reached #18 on Billboard's country charts as the "B" side of her #5 hit "Mommy For A Day."

When Jack appeared at the Quonset Hut to record his version of "All The Time," it was discovered that they were short of material. Greene had already recorded another Dallas Frazier song "Wanting You But Never Having You," at a previous session. This song was considered strong enough to be released as an "A" side, but since they were short, it was decided to release "All The Time" and "Wanting You But Never Having You" together on the same record, designating "All The Time" as the "A" side and "Wanting You But Never Having You" as the "B" side. It was unfortunate that this move was necessary because, since most of the emphasis and promotion was placed on "All The Time," "Wanting You But

Never Having You" reached only #63. If it had been released as a stand-alone hit, "Wanting You But Never Having You" would have fared much better, reaching at least Top Ten status and perhaps number one, it was that good.

Nevertheless, the "A" side, "All The Time" did sail into the #1 slot for a five-week run at the top beginning June 17, 1967. Buoyed by a "concerto"-type piano sound from Floyd Cramer, the record was selected in December as the number one country single for the entire year of 1967 by Billboard Magazine. Next, Greene had a near-miss, peaking at #2 with Vic McAlpin's "What Locks The Door" before returning to the top with "You Are My Treasure."

This song was written especially for Jack by renowned tunesmith Cindy Walker, composer of such #1 hits as Eddy Arnold's "Take Me In Your Arms And Hold Me," Webb Pierce's "I Don't Care," Mickey Gilley's "You Don't Know Me," Merle Haggard's "Cherokee Maiden," Jim Reeves' "This Is It" and "Distant Drums," Sonny James' "Heaven Says Hello" and many more.

Walker had heard Greene being interviewed by Ralph Emery on Nashville's WSM-AM and, thinking that Jack had a certain quality in his voice when he talked, she decided to write a song around it featuring a spoken-word part in the middle. She called her new song "You Are My Treasure," and sent it over to Owen Bradley at Decca, with specifications that she wanted Jack Greene to cut it. Bradley however was unsure about the song being suitable for Jack and asked Cindy if he could record it with Bill Anderson, well-known for his long line of recitations. Walker declined, insisting that "You Are My Treasure" had been written specifically for Greene, so Owen recorded it with Jack along with an ensemble of thirty musicians (including a string section) all present in the studio at the same time. "You Are My Treasure" reached the #1 plateau on Billboard's country singles chart April 13, 1968. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Dixie Road"
(written by Don Goodman, Mary Ann Kennedy & Pam Rose)

Lee Greenwood (#1, 1985)

Lee Greenwood recorded "Dixie Road" specifically for his "Greatest Hits" album, which would go on to achieve "platinum" status (meaning sales of over a million copies). This album meant a great deal to him personally, because years earlier he doubted that he'd ever record again. Greenwood had signed with Paramount Records and moved to Los Angeles, when the city experienced an earthquake on his very first day in town, February 9, 1971. Though a natural occurrence, it served as an omen for the fate of his contract. The record deal with Paramount was a shady one at best, and wasn't destined to get off the ground. Lee was new in the business and signed the contract without really checking it out first, an easy mistake for a young, inexperienced performer.

Gulf + Western purchased Paramount and Greenwood's debut record "My First Day Alone Without You" was never released. To make matters worse, the new management refused to let Greenwood out of his five-year contract. With Lee unable to pursue his dream, his finances fell into disarray and many of his belongings were repossessed. Desperate and depressed, Greenwood went to work frying poultry in a

fast-food establishment in the Los Angeles area called Dixie Chicken. The job lasted only three months before he moved on to a series of jobs in Montana, San Diego and Las Vegas. In Las Vegas he worked in a casino, dealing blackjack by day and singing by night. One night while freelancing in Reno, Nevada, Greenwood's performance was caught by Larry McFaden, the bandleader and bassist for Mel Tillis's touring group "The Statesiders." McFaden (who later became Lee's manager) was impressed with Greenwood's talent and encouraged him to make some demo tapes, which Larry used to arrange an audition with MCA Records in the fall of 1980. Lee made his way to Nashville and met producer Jerry Crutchfield for the first time. Crutchfield was fascinated with Greenwood's unique voice which had a kind of "smoky" quality along with a quivering vibrato, although at first, Jerry couldn't quite figure out what approach to take with it. One thing he did know was that the right song material was imperative in order to make it work.

Nearly a year passed before Greenwood and Crutchfield got back together, but during that time Jerry never lost his enthusiasm because he knew that he had heard a voice that he deemed "unbelievably great," and he wanted to get Greenwood signed to a record deal with MCA as soon as possible. Crutchfield now had a song that he believed suited Lee's voice and style, and would make a great debut single for him called "It Turns Me Inside Out." The tune had been written by Jerry's brother Jan Crutchfield, known for such #1 hits as Jack Greene's "Statue of a Fool" and Dave & Sugar's "Tear Time." Jan wrote "It Turns Me Inside Out" with Kenny Rogers in mind, but due to the sheer volume of songs being offered to him at the time, Rogers was forced to turn it down. It was then that Crutchfield offered the tune to Greenwood. Lee's debut single for MCA vaulted him into Billboard's Top Twenty for the first time, and more importantly "It Turns Me Inside Out" was nominated for 1982's "Song of the Year" award by the Country Music Association (although it lost to Willie Nelson's big hit "Always On My Mind").

After "It Turns Me Inside Out," Greenwood started producing Top Ten hits fairly consistently, even notching two #1 records and CMA awards for "Male Vocalist of the Year" in both 1983 and 1984. The stage was now set for Lee's third #1 single "Dixie Road." The song had been suggested to him at a recording session by one of "Dixie Road's" writers Mary Ann Kennedy. She had co-written the tune with Don Goodman and Pam Rose some four years earlier, at about the same time they had composed "Ring On Her Finger, Time On Her Hands," which Lee had taken to #5 a couple of years before. Kennedy asked Greenwood to give the song a listen, although she didn't think he would be interested because it was more typically country-sounding than any of his previous singles. Instead, Lee thought "Dixie Road" was perfect. In fact he thought it was so good that he was amazed the writers hadn't pitched the song to somebody else years earlier, and felt extremely fortunate that he would be the one to record it. "Dixie Road" contained a tried-and-true storyline: Boy meets girl, he wants to go on and be a star and she doesn't want to hold him back. With this scenario, along with a solid country-sounding arrangement, the song had all the right ingredients for a hit country song at the time. It didn't disappoint. "Dixie Road" debuted on Billboard's country singles chart on April 20, 1985, and in its twelfth week landed at the #1 plateau on July 20th.

No story about Lee Greenwood would be complete without mentioning his famous patriotic hit "God Bless The USA." The original version of "God Bless The USA" came out about a year before "Dixie Road," but surprisingly didn't reach #1 (it peaked at #7 in the summer of '84). However, the song gained renewed popularity after the launch of "Operation: Desert Storm" in 1991, and again ten years later following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In fact, "God Bless The USA" re-entered the Top Twenty of the Billboard country charts in late 2001 (it was a new version of the song, because by then, Greenwood was recording for a different label). The 2001 re-release even made the Top Twenty on the Billboard Hot 100

pop chart, peaking at #16. Greenwood still performs his signature song at various public events and commemorations of the 9/11 attacks. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Okie From Muskogee"
(written by Merle Haggard & Roy Burris)

Merle Haggard (#1 country, #41 pop, 1969)

Merle Haggard might have very well grown up on the streets of Muskogee, Oklahoma if the Great Depression hadn't forced his family to leave for California just three years before the singer's birth. As it was, Haggard felt as if he knew the area and its people thanks to the stories he heard not only from his immediate family, but also from a host of other Okies who had migrated to the Bakersfield area. So even though by birth Merle was a Californian, by culture and home environment he was also an Oklahoman. If he ever forgot this fact, there was a host of folks nearby who would gladly remind him at length about his Dust Bowl roots. Through the years, this knowledge would help keep Merle closely-connected to the common man and prevent the trappings of show business from steering him toward a more fanciful lifestyle that most celebrities often accept.

As Merle Haggard's star was rising on the country music scene in the mid-1960s, America's populace was growing very cynical in its attitude. The civil rights movement and the Vietnam War had drawn broad lines between races and generations and millions from a confused generation of baby boomers rebelled against society and their parents by getting involved in drugs, sex and alternative lifestyles. The once unthinkable was now a part of everyday life as whole sections of cities were set on fire, college students were gunned down by National Guardsmen, draft cards were burned in front of courthouses, prominent political figures were assassinated and riots ensued on national television. No one could make sense out of this cultural revolution and few were even bothering to try. Meanwhile in the nation's heartland, folks were grateful that these things were happening mostly in urban areas and that life in America's small towns still had a semblance of normalcy.

It was during this period that Merle Haggard was riding his songs of the working man and the common people to the top of the country charts. In constant demand, Haggard spent most of his time travelling on a bus from show to show. His travels took him hundreds of thousands of miles from coast to coast. With fans in the Farm Belt as well as on college campuses, Merle and his band got to see the status of America's citizens up close and personal, and clearly the people were troubled.

One day, Merle and his band were on the bus travelling through Oklahoma on their way to another show and they found themselves locked in a political discussion. They saw a sign along the interstate that read: "Muskogee 19 miles." One of the band members commented that the citizens of Muskogee probably didn't smoke marijuana. Always observant of little comments like that which might trigger a song idea, Haggard started to compile a list of other things that they probably didn't do in Central Oklahoma. Before long, Merle and his drummer Roy Burris were scribbling down their observations on paper and setting them into verses. Within twenty minutes the duo had finished a song entitled "Okie

From Muskogee." They thought of their final product in terms of a novelty number, but it was destined to become so much more.

"Okie From Muskogee's" main message came from the trials and tribulations of modern American news stories, but the title was more of a tribute to Merle Haggard's father James, who died in 1946 when the boy was only nine years old. In the early 1930s James Haggard was living in Checotah, Oklahoma (about 20 miles south of Muskogee) when the Great Depression took its life-altering grip on the Sooner State. In 1934 he was forced to give up the family farm, pack his few possessions on an old truck and migrate west (as depicted by the Joad family in the movie classic "The Grapes Of Wrath"), settling in Bakersfield, California. James was looked down on, labeled white trash and ridiculed for the remainder of his life. He even had to convert an old abandoned boxcar in order to provide a home for his family, but he never lost his self-respect and never stopped being proud to be an American and an Okie. To the elder Haggard, there was no shame in either. The man died poor but proud of who he was.

The lyrics of Merle's newest composition gave voice to America's silent majority that was obviously displeased and disgusted by what was going on with the nation's rebellious society during the late 1960s. Although Haggard considered "Okie From Muskogee" just a novelty song and a "piece of fluff" when he wrote it, he would soon discover the tremendous impact and power this tune would generate. It proved to be the focal point of one of the most astute marketing campaigns of all time.

Initially recorded in Capitol's Los Angeles studio, "Okie From Muskogee" was released in the late summer of 1969 and found its way to Billboard's country singles chart by October 11th. As Haggard began to plug the number in concerts, he quickly realized that he had made a mistake. The crowds had so embraced "Okie From Muskogee" that Merle came to believe he should have cut it in a "live" setting. Making a call to Capitol producer Ken Nelson, Haggard persuaded the label to re-cut and re-ship a version of the song taped at a show in Philadelphia. The studio version (which I personally preferred) was pulled from distribution and the "live" version substituted, and this is the track that ruled the #1 position on the Billboard country playlist for four consecutive weeks from November 15th through December 13th of 1969. Surprisingly Billboard's Hot 100 pop chart also embraced Merle's ode to redneck America, where it topped out at #41 (a pretty good showing). In the South, the record even climbed into the Top Ten on some localized rock playlists.

There is little doubt that many of Merle Haggard's compositions are far better crafted than "Okie From Muskogee." This tune simply does not contain the artistry of "Today I Started Loving You Again" or "Hungry Eyes," yet no Haggard song ever meant as much to so many as "Okie From Muskogee." Timing had a great deal to do with its popularity. Certainly the song would have made no sense had it been released in the 1950s and it probably would have been dismissed had it come out in the 1980s. Yet, by talking about middle-American family values in 1969, "Okie From Muskogee" hit home with its message. This was a song that millions were willing to hang their hats on. By buying this record and singing this song, they could vent their rage and disgust with the hippies and draft dodgers.

Sensing the commercial possibilities fueled by "Okie From Muskogee," Haggard wrote another, even more-spirited pro-American song called "The Fightin' Side Of Me." Ending his shows with these two flag-waving hits sent some crowds into a patriotic frenzy. At times the fervor that was exhibited at these concerts caused Merle some concern. And even though his booking fee had tripled since "Okie From Muskogee" hit the charts, Haggard quickly became uncomfortable being draped in the flag. He was a solid American, but he had no interest in becoming a political lightning rod.

With “Okie From Muskogee” having generated endless invitations to the Richard Nixon White House, a shelf of CMA awards and five-figure booking fees, the song looked to be a ticket that Haggard could ride for years. Yet, even while the song was still in solid rotation on radio, Haggard began to back away from its message. Merle separated himself from a wide number of groups who wanted to use him and his music for their own brand of Americanism. Stepping out front, Haggard voiced his own concerns about racial problems and social programs. More often than not, his thoughts were more liberal and tolerant than the opinions of those who had so embraced his patriotic music. Merle also refused to take a stand supporting the Vietnam War. While he praised the men who fought it, he wouldn’t acknowledge that he understood why American troops were being asked to give their lives for this cause. Back in the studio, Haggard returned to writing songs with more common and individual themes, compositions that asked questions provoking personal thought and introspection, not political action or flag waving.

“Okie From Muskogee” would become Merle Haggard’s all-time biggest-selling single. It was also the song that defined his career. He and “Okie” would always be inseparable. Yet, Haggard himself was far-more complex than the song indicated, and while “Okie From Muskogee” was a strong catalyst for the reversal of the counterculture movement which continued decades after the song’s release, it was never meant as a political statement. To Merle, it was just a fun piece that allowed him to revisit a place his father had held dear. “Okie From Muskogee” was never really meant to be anything more. Yet, when it took the nation by storm, Merle found out firsthand the kind of power country music now possessed. In a move that tells a great deal about the man’s character, it was a power he never sought to abuse or misuse. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“Country Is”
(written by Tom T. Hall)

Tom T. Hall (#1, 1974)

In its December 7, 1974 issue, Billboard Magazine ran a story titled “What Is Country Music? Charts Reflect Confusion.” The article pointed to a division among country radio programmers about how to deal with the influx of artists from the pop playlists, including such CMA award-winners as John Denver and Olivia Newton-John. Even twenty years later this was still a hot topic, re-introduced to the forefront by Bob McDill’s classic composition “Gone Country,” brought to the top of the charts through Alan Jackson’s 1994 hit.

Of course, long before 1974, performers had straddled multiple charts for years, but the issue had suddenly become controversial (probably because the performers in question had “imported” to Nashville, and not made Music City their home base from the beginning). In reaction, some radio stations took a hardline stance against records perceived as “non-country.” Likewise, fifty Nashville performers formed the Association of Country Entertainers (ACE). The organization’s attempts to promote real country music alienated and eliminated several of the pop artists (particularly Newton-John), which I suspect had been the goal all along.

The question of “What Is Country?” was already being handled at the time, though, by the astute Tom T. Hall, who reached #1 during the peak of the controversy with “Country Is.” Explaining the song’s origins, Hall reflected that since he had an inclination toward prose, he would sometimes write the liner notes for his own albums and decided to do one defining what country music is to him (like he did with the list he had made in writing his earlier hit “I Love”). Well, the liner notes turned into a song instead. Hall brought up some very good points in his tune, but after it was all said and done, Tom insisted that Kris Kristofferson said it best: “If it sounds country, it’s country.”

Ironically, with the single just before “Country Is,” Hall had tested country’s limits himself with his infectious little tune called “That Song Is Driving Me Crazy.” That record ended with a full Dixieland jazz ensemble, hardly a traditional-sounding country arrangement, but the experimental twist propelled the song to #2 on Billboard’s country singles chart. Tom resigned from the Grand Ole Opry at the time, claiming that he wouldn’t be allowed to perform with horns on stage. The Opry also forbade drums for many years, keeping Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys off the show in the 1940s. I believe both rules have since been lifted. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

”Before This Day Ends”
(written by Roy Drusky, Vic McAlpin and Marie Wilson)

George Hamilton IV (#4, 1960)
Eddy Arnold (#23, 1961)

Proclaimed the “International Ambassador of Country Music” thanks to his performances around the world in the 1970s, George Hamilton IV began his career in the mid-1950s, marketed as a teen-oriented pop star. While enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, he appeared on a live music show on a Durham, North Carolina television station. It was there that George was introduced to two men who would change his life: Orville Campbell of Colonial Records (a small label based in Chapel Hill) and songwriter/producer/arranger John D. Loudermilk. Hamilton approached Campbell about perhaps recording a few tunes for his label. Campbell seemed interested in the idea. Loudermilk, meanwhile, had written his first composition called “A Rose And A Baby Ruth” and played it for George, who was initially unimpressed. John took his song to Campbell, one thing led to another, and Hamilton found himself in the campus radio station recording “A Rose And A Baby Ruth,” a song that he really didn’t care for.

Colonial issued the record to regional distribution, but to everyone’s surprise, ABC-Paramount picked up the master and released it nationally. After “A Rose And A Baby Ruth” reached #6 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1956, George was assigned to tour with The Everly Brothers and Buddy Holly, but cracked the pop Top Ten only one more time with a song called “Why Don’t They Understand.” It was an ironic title because Hamilton didn’t really want to continue pursuing success in the pop music world anyway. His heart was and always had been in country music (similar to the career path Conway Twitty took in the mid-‘60s), and by 1959 George had decided to make the move to Nashville.

A few months after Hamilton’s arrival in Music City, he was asked to join Nashville’s prestigious Grand Ole Opry, even though he hadn’t yet scored a country hit. However, George’s sincerity shown through,

and his love of country music was evident. He was still under contract to ABC-Paramount, which wasn't too enamored with the idea of George "going country," but undeterred, Hamilton began scouting for country songs to record. He found one called "Before This Day Ends," co-written by Roy Drusky, Vic McAlpin and Marie Wilson. Hamilton liked the song very much and decided right then and there to record it, but he had a couple of problems. His wife didn't care much for the song, and neither did his friend John D. Loudermilk, who had written George's first big hit "A Rose And A Baby Ruth" and was serving as his producer during his tenure at ABC-Paramount. So, influenced by their opinions, George opted not to record "Before This Day Ends."

At the session a few days later, George and his team were working to perfect a song called "Loneliness All Around Me," when in walked Roy Drusky and Vic McAlpin. They knew about the session and (thinking that Hamilton was going to record their song) decided to drop in and observe! George thought, "Well, I guess I've got to record it now," so with just fifteen minutes left on the session, they worked up a quick arrangement and rushed through "Before This Day Ends," nailing it on the first take (the only one they really had time for anyway), thus ending the session on schedule. By the way, this was the first session for steel guitarist Pete Drake, who recorded "Anymore" with Roy Drusky the next day, and went on to become one of Nashville's all-time most-revered session players.

"Before This Day Ends" became a #4 hit on Billboard's country singles chart, marking George Hamilton IV's solid first outing as a country recording artist. Shortly afterward, RCA Victor came calling with a much more lucrative contract than ABC-Paramount's, and George was on his way to a long and successful country music career. Three years later, his 1963 number one smash "Abilene," (usually mistakenly credited to Loudermilk, although it was actually written by Lester Brown and Bob Gibson) became one of the biggest hits of the sixties and an all-time country standard. One last footnote: In probably one of the quickest covers ever, Eddy Arnold had his own hit with "Before This Day Ends" just one year after Hamilton's original Top Five release. Arnold's version wasn't as successful, reaching only #23. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Easy Loving"
(written by Freddie Hart)

Freddie Hart (#1 country, #17 pop, 1971)

Freddie Hart used to say that there are number one songs, and there are "trunk-of-the-tree" songs – songs that other songs take from. Others are branches, even though they reach #1 on the charts. He cited several examples as "trunk-of-the-tree" songs: classics such as Don Gibson's "I Can't Stop Loving You," Eddie Miller's "Release Me" and Jimmy Dean's "Big Bad John," along with his very own "Easy Loving." Freddie's 1971 blockbuster hit was also a bit of a fluke.

Hart had been recording for more than eighteen years, but his high-water mark on the Billboard charts had been logged back in 1959 with a couple of singles on the Columbia label that had barely nudged the Top Twenty: "Chain Gang" and "The Key's In The Mailbox." By 1970, he was recording for Capitol and had released an album called "California Grapevine," but when the title track was issued as a single and

stalled at a disappointing #68, Capitol summarily dropped Freddie from the label and the album was pulled from distribution. Then a miracle happened when deejay Jim Clemons at WPLO, Atlanta started playing a cut from the album called "Easy Loving." The song virtually exploded all over the country like a huge tidal wave. Capitol rush-released it as a single and it reached #1 even before the label could re-sign Hart. Here was an artist who had the nation's top song and he didn't have a recording contract at the time! Freddie was re-signed in short order however, and spent many more profitable years with Capitol Records.

Originally, Hart wrote "Easy Loving" under the working title "Easy Loving Teenage Hearts," although it was eventually shortened and the age references were dropped. Freddie then targeted his goal toward simply writing something that every man would like to say, and that every woman would like to hear. It came out fresh and unique. In fact, "Easy Loving" was the first #1 country song to use the descriptive term "sexy" in its lyrics (John D. Loudermilk had included the word in his song "Fort Worth, Dallas Or Houston," recorded by George Hamilton IV in 1964, but that single hadn't reached #1). Hart seriously considered removing the line "so sexy looking" because he thought it wouldn't clear the censors, but he ended up leaving the line in.

In the recording studio, guitarist Bill Sanford and steel guitar player George Green played a unison line that provided the record's instrumental trademark, and the track was completed in just two takes. "Easy Loving" reached the #1 plateau on Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart on September 11, 1971, where it stayed for three weeks. It instantly built Freddie Hart's momentum enough for him to notch twelve consecutive Top Ten hits, including five more number ones in a row. One of those, the immediate follow-up to "Easy Loving" called "My Hang Up Is You" rested at #1 for six weeks, making it one of the three biggest country hits of the 1970s (the other two were Waylon Jennings' "Luckenbach, Texas" and C. W. McCall's "Convoy"). A glitch in the eligibility criteria allowed "Easy Loving" to win the "Song of the Year" award from the Country Music Association two years in a row, in 1971 and again in 1972. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Highwayman"
(written by Jimmy Webb)

Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash
and Kris Kristofferson (#1, 1985)

This one's quite unusual, at least for country music and probably for all genres, in that it deals with reincarnation on multiple levels. Perhaps no other song can lay claim to that. "Highwayman" was written by Jimmy Webb, who had composed many of those old Glen Campbell classics we all love so much, like "Wichita Lineman," "By The Time I Get To Phoenix," "Galveston" and several others. When he first conceived the idea for "Highwayman," Webb originally intended it as a study in the evolution of a soul. Jimmy had experienced a vivid dream in which he was a highwayman (a holdup man of the old west, usually on horseback, who robbed travelers along a public road). In the dream, he was pursued and then hanged. A unique idea for a song, to be sure. Up until then, Jimmy hadn't thought much about past lives.

Webb recorded the tune for his 1977 album "El Mirage," and a couple of years later Glen Campbell titled one of his own albums after it. "Highwayman" was covered much more successfully by Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Kris Kristofferson when the song came to their attention while the four men were in Switzerland recording a television special. Nelson asked Cash if he might be interested in doing a duet album with him, but Johnny wasn't too keen on the idea at first because at the time, Willie was recording duets with just about everyone in the business and Cash wasn't interested in "standing in line" to get a duet album on the market with him. However, after Jennings and Kristofferson showed an interest in going into the studio with Nelson, Cash's opinion changed and he decided to jump on board too.

The Jimmy Webb piece which had inspired the album to begin with, "Highwayman," was selected as the LP's title and it became a top-priority project at producer Chips Moman's American Studios as well as the Woodland Sound Studio in Nashville. Exactly half of the ten cuts featured all four vocalists, while the others represented a variety of duets and trios, with outside help on one track from Johnny Rodriguez.

The four performers had listened to the demo of "Highwayman" only once, but that was all it took for the men to decide to do it, mainly because Webb's songwriting was held in such high regard among music industry personnel in Nashville. However, Kris Kristofferson has having a few problems getting the song down, and it confused Waylon Jennings quite a bit. At first, he couldn't figure out the storyline. Then after realizing that it was about four different people, he fully understood, and was able to successfully approach the number. He considered it tailor-made for the foursome, with each artist taking one of the song's four main characters.

"Highwayman" was the first single from the finished album and it had just hit the market when Jennings, Nelson, Cash and Kristofferson first performed the song live on stage at Willie's Fourth of July picnic in 1985. The single topped Billboard's country chart on August 17th and Waylon, Willie & Johnny (with Glen Campbell filling in for Kris) sang it publicly again at the "Farm Aid" concert in September of '85.

"Highwayman" won the Grammy award for "Country Song of the Year" in February of 1986, and the record was named the year's top single by the Academy of Country Music. Buoyed by the extraordinary sales of the "Highwayman" album (over 500,000 units), Jennings, Nelson, Cash and Kristofferson recorded "Highwayman II" in 1989, but that album yielded no hit singles. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"The Battle Of New Orleans"
(written by Jimmie Driftwood)

Johnny Horton (#1 country, #1 pop, 1959)

"The Battle of New Orleans" is probably the only hit song ever inspired by a need to motivate a grade school class. James Morris had grown up in the Ozark tradition of playing music and writing poetry. His nickname since birth was "Driftwood," and he came from a family of guitar and fiddle-playing "hillbilly" singers. Not only did the Morris clan compose much of what they performed, but most of their instruments were homemade. They were therefore as much craftsmen as musicians, and they were

proud of both these talents. For the first half of the Twentieth Century, music, hard work and hard times were the common ties for most of the Arkansas backwoods people. Of those three, only music consistently produced real joy and relief. For Driftwood and the rest of the Morris family, it was always a primary focus in their lives. A day never went by that they weren't playing, singing or studying music.

Unlike most of the locals, Driftwood left the hills long enough to journey to Conway, Arkansas and earn his college degree at Arkansas State Teachers College (now University of Central Arkansas). In the midst of the Great Depression, he then returned to his roots to teach. By 1936 Driftwood was an underpaid and overworked twenty-nine year old Snowball, Arkansas schoolteacher trying to get his sixth-grade pupils interested in history. No matter what he attempted, books, pictures or reports, they didn't respond. Then in a moment of real inspiration, Driftwood drew upon self-penned poetry as a way of sharing the world's most important events. It was this history, set to a poet's rhythm, that first captured the students' interest while also teaching them something they once had not wanted to learn. Placing more historical odes to music, Driftwood discovered a teaching aid that really worked. He used it time and time again. Hence, to the teacher, his poem "The Battle of New Orleans," set to an old square dance fiddle tune "The Eighth of January," was simply another in a long line of motivational classroom tools.

For the next two decades, Driftwood took his historical songs with him wherever he taught. His students also took the songs with them as they fanned out across the area, region and nation. By the mid-1950s, the songwriter had developed a certain degree of respect and esteem from the folks living in the hills and hollows surrounding the towns of Timbo, Mountain View and Snowball, Arkansas. He was also becoming well-known in school districts throughout the Ozarks. Yet no one, especially Driftwood, ever dreamed that his work would be anything more than a student learning stimulator.

In the mid-1950s Porter Wagoner and his manager and steel guitar player Don Warden were working the "Ozark Jubilee" network television show out of Springfield, Missouri, and decided to go into business together, forming a publishing company. Initially, its sole purpose was to serve as an outlet to get Porter's compositions published, but within a year the duo saw a need for growth, and Don began searching the area for songwriters who might be willing to sign on with the new company. In 1957, Warden's old friend Hugh Ashley told him about a songwriting teacher with a great deal of untapped talent living in the Ozark backwoods town of Timbo, Arkansas. The publisher jotted down the writer's name and hometown, and promised his friend that he would give him a call. A few days later, Warden sought out Driftwood's telephone number. He found that there was no listing for a Jimmie Driftwood or a James Morris. As the publisher would discover, Driftwood had never obtained a telephone. Warden then tried writing Driftwood in care of general delivery. A few weeks later he received a reply. Warden wrote back and asked Driftwood to put some of his songs on tape and send them to his office. The teacher answered, explaining that he didn't have access to a tape recorder, so he asked if he could meet with Don in Nashville over the next school holiday and sing the songs to him in person, which was agreed to.

During their meeting, Jimmy Driftwood played Warden almost everything he had written. Don was only mildly impressed, certainly not moved enough to make any offers. As the publisher was getting up to leave, Jimmy began singing "The Battle of New Orleans." Warden paused to listen, smiled and sat back down. Within the next few minutes, Don hatched a plan to get Driftwood not only a songwriter's contract, but a recording deal as well. Chet Atkins at RCA Victor thought enough of Warden's endorsement and Driftwood's songs to place twelve of the teacher's compositions on an album of folk music. Yet, the label had little success promoting the final product because there was simply no niche for it in the market at the time. It seemed that Driftwood's material was too folk-sounding for country

radio stations, and too country for the pop stations. “The Battle of New Orleans” was considered the standout cut on the album, but it contained the words “damn” and “hell,” both considered taboo for the airwaves in the late ‘50s. However, after much lobbying from Atkins and the RCA promotions department, Nashville’s country music powerhouse WSM Radio began playing Driftwood’s “The Battle of New Orleans” occasionally, but only in the middle of the night.

Johnny Horton, a former Baylor University basketball player and geology student, was driving back from a late-night, small-town concert gig when he caught “The Battle of New Orleans” on his car radio at 2:00 A.M. The next day he telephoned Columbia Records to set up a session to cut the song. At the time, Horton had enjoyed some mild success on the Columbia label, notching four top ten records in three years, even a #1 hit “When It’s Springtime In Alaska (It’s Forty Below),” but he hadn’t been able to land the monster that every recording artist dreams of having. While Columbia didn’t mind spending a bit of time fulfilling Horton’s request to record “The Battle of New Orleans,” releasing the cut as a single was considered risky by the label’s executives, who thought it might not be worth the effort or the money to do. Traditionally, folk or story-type songs had not performed well in the country music market. Since Elvis’s rise to fame, traditional instruments such as fiddles and steel guitars had taken a backseat to a more bass, electric guitar and drum-driven sound. Within the previous year, rock ‘n’ roll standards like “Hound Dog,” “Great Balls Of Fire,” “Jailhouse Rock” and “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” had all been huge country hits. “The Battle of New Orleans” thus went against every facet of the current market trend. Yet, with Horton’s urging, Columbia agreed to release the song as a single. No one expected what was to follow.

From the first day Johnny Horton’s version of “The Battle of New Orleans” hit the airwaves (with the two controversial words substituted), radio stations’ request lines lit up. By mid-summer of ’59 the song had climbed into the #1 position on both the country and pop charts, and would ride those charts for better than half a year. Ultimately, it was the biggest song of 1959, one of the twenty-five top songs of the first five years of the rock ‘n’ roll era, and made Johnny Horton into a national sensation. It would also spawn a number of historically-based hits for a host of recording stars, such as Stonewall Jackson’s “Waterloo,” Carl Smith’s “Ten Thousand Drums,” Hawkshaw Hawkins’ “Soldier’s Joy,” as well as “Johnny Reb” and “Sink The Bismark” for Horton himself. While it may not have changed the classroom teaching methods of other history teachers besides Jimmie Driftwood, “The Battle of New Orleans” did give rise to a new folk-driven sound in both country and pop music.

Even before Horton’s version of “The Battle of New Orleans” took off, Driftwood returned to the Arkansas hills to resume writing songs and teaching school. Over the course of the next twenty years, he would compose several more tunes for such stars as Eddy Arnold, who had a Top Five hit with Jimmie’s song about a horse called the “Tennessee Stud.” During that time, Driftwood performed at the Grand Ole Opry, toured the world as an entertainer, became known as one of the foremost experts on American folk music, and even got a telephone! Four decades after his song hit the top of the country and pop charts and almost sixty years after he had first performed it for his sixth-grade history class, Jimmie was still performing “The Battle of New Orleans” and winning new fans to his kind of hillbilly folk music until his death from a heart attack on July 12, 1998 in Fayetteville, Arkansas. He was 91 years old. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Almost Persuaded"
(written by Billy Sherrill and Glenn Sutton)

David Houston (#1 country, #24 pop, 1966)

I touched on this record several weeks ago in one of my previous "stories behind the song" regarding Loretta Lynn's first huge hit "You Ain't Woman Enough." As it turned out, Loretta's record stalled at #2 for two weeks on Billboard's country singles chart, blocked from the top spot by one of the 1960s' best-remembered classics, David Houston's "Almost Persuaded." My earlier story mentioned how Houston's ode to the temptations of cheating with an appealing young woman flew in the face of the message Lynn was preaching in "You Ain't Woman Enough," (although David's record ends satisfactorily, with the narrator of the song going home to his wife and not following through with his temptation), and even though Houston had won this particular skirmish, Loretta would ultimately go on to win the war with a career that would reach legendary proportions, whereas David's time in the spotlight would last just over ten years, and he would be dead of a brain aneurysm by 1993 at the age of only 54.

However, David Houston was no bush-leaguer. In fact, he's responsible for a couple of "firsts" in the record business. On October 19, 1963, Houston's first release "Mountain Of Love" (not to be confused with Charley Pride's #1 hit with the same title) entered Billboard's country singles chart, making it the first Top Five single issued by Epic Records, a branch of parent label Columbia. "Mountain Of Love" eventually stalled out at #2, but on August 13, 1966, David's "Almost Persuaded" began a nine week stay in the #1 position, making it the first song written and/or produced by Billy Sherrill to reach the top.

Winner of two Grammy awards (for "Best Country Vocal Performance by a Male" and "Best Country Song"), "Almost Persuaded" occurred as a fluke. Houston was scheduled to record a tune called "We Got Love" at 8:00 AM the next morning. He drove up from Shreveport, Louisiana and took a room for the night at Nashville's Sam Davis Hotel, but he had a problem. David didn't have a "B" side ready to cut, and when his producer Billy Sherrill heard about this, he grabbed one of his favorite collaborators, Glenn Sutton, and worked down to the wire trying to come up with another song for the next morning's session. The two men had one verse and the chorus written by midnight, and they wanted to show Houston what they had thus far, but the very old Sam Davis Hotel had no elevators and Sherrill was afraid to go in, fearful the building would catch fire (well, we're all a little strange in our own way), so Billy sent Sutton in there with the song. Houston liked it alright, so the two songwriters carried on with their work, and by daybreak they had the second verse. David recorded "Almost Persuaded," along with the designated "A" side "We Got Love," at the scheduled 8:00 session. That's cutting things pretty close!

"Almost Persuaded" contained a simple, but very effective keyboard line provided by the session's piano player Hargus "Pig" Robbins, which really made the cut stand out. The record shipped with "We Got Love" as the designated hit, but deejay Mac Curtis, one of Atlanta's most influential broadcasters, turned the record over and began playing "Almost Persuaded" on his morning radio show on WPLO-AM, then one of America's top country music stations. Audience response was overwhelming, guaranteeing "Almost Persuaded's" nationwide success. In addition to spending nine weeks at #1 (making it the ninth biggest country hit of the 1960s), the record would peak at a very respectable #24 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)"
(written by Alan Jackson)

Alan Jackson (#1, country, #28 pop, 2001)

Arguably, there have been only four events which have occurred in our current society's lifespan that we (if we are old enough) can all remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when the news came down. The first would be the attacks at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Second would be the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963. Third would be the death of Elvis Presley on August 16, 1977, and fourth, and most dramatic of them all, were the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D. C. on September 11, 2001.

Those attacks, which came to be known simply as "Nine Eleven" had a profound effect on everybody, and this story tells about the reaction of this incredibly horrifying event by one country music performer, and his response to it.

Alan Jackson had been a top star in country music for nearly a dozen years, proudly carrying his traditional sound to unprecedented modern-day popularity. On the morning of the attacks, Jackson had just returned from his daily walk. He switched on the television and immediately heard the news. Alan's "songwriter instinct" took over and he was caught up in the desire to compose a song capturing his thoughts and emotions surrounding the attacks. It wasn't his intention to write a patriotic song, and he didn't want it to be vengeful either. In it, Alan just wanted to tell about how he felt and how he knew other people must have felt on that terrible day.

Several weeks went by before he was able to put his emotions into a song. Finally, on the morning of Sunday, October 28, 2001, Jackson suddenly awakened at 4 a. m. with the melody, opening lines and chorus going through his mind. He hastily got out of bed and sang them into a hand-held digital recorder so he would not forget them. Later that morning, after his wife and children had gone to church, Alan sat down in his study and completed the lyrics to "Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)."

Initially, Jackson felt uneasy about even recording the piece, much less releasing it, because he felt that people might accuse him of capitalizing on a tragedy. But after playing the song for his wife Denise, then for his producer Keith Stegall, it was recommended (by Stegall) that Alan play the song at a group meeting of his label's executives. RCA Label Group Chairman Joe Galante later remembered, "After the song finished playing, we all just kind of looked at one another in stunned silence. Nobody spoke for a full minute."

Jackson was scheduled to perform at the Country Music Association's annual awards ceremony on November 7, 2001, to be telecast on CBS. Originally, he planned to perform "Where I Come From," which at the time was the #1 hit on Billboard's country singles chart. But mere days before the awards show, Alan's manager, Nancy Russell, played a recording of "Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)" for four of the CMA's top executives. All four were crying by the time the song ended.

The day before the show, CMT posted a brief note on its website indicating that Jackson would be introducing the new song on the awards telecast. The next night, after an introduction from the show's

host Vince Gill, Alan performed “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” while seated on a stool, with an orchestra and backing singers behind him. At the conclusion of the five-minute-long song, the audience gave him an immediate standing ovation. This performance, along with the Vince Gill introduction, was used as the song’s music video.

The next morning, many of the nation’s country music radio stations were already playing Jackson’s new song after taping it from the broadcast. Several pop-oriented stations, including one in New York City, started to play it as well. Based entirely on that unsolicited airplay, “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” debuted at #25 on the Billboard country chart the week ending November 24, 2001, the highest debut since Garth Brooks’ “The Thunder Rolls” debuted at #19 in 1991. A week later, with Arista finally having serviced a promotional single to radio, the song jumped to #12. On the December 29th chart, “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning) was the number one song. It had taken just six weeks to get there, the fastest ascension to the top in four years. The song spent five weeks at the summit, and also peaked at #28 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart.

Jackson’s record label determined that it could not manufacture a commercial single fast enough to meet demand. Instead, Arista pushed up the release date for Alan’s new album, “Drive,” from May to January 15th. Arista also chose to include both the studio version and the live CMA Awards version on the album. The pent-up demand for “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” helped propel the album to the summit of both the Billboard country and pop album charts, becoming Jackson’s first number one pop album. It held the top position for five weeks.

“Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” was never sold as a benefit song, and it is unknown if proceeds from the song’s success were donated to various Nine-Eleven-related benefit organizations. Management for Jackson only claimed at the time of the song’s release that Jackson “has no official ties to any non-profit group,” and he “prefers to make his donations privately.”

Critical response to “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” was overwhelmingly positive. Music analysts appreciated its simple message and largely apolitical stance. Jackson downplayed his own contribution to the song’s success, quoting a phrase often credited to Hank Williams who supposedly said, “God writes the songs, I just hold the pen.” Alan considered his creation’s enormous popularity and subsequent accolades to be personally overwhelming and rather uncomfortable due to its subject matter.

Among the notable awards that “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” took were “Song of the Year” honors from both the Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music. It won for Alan Jackson his first Grammy award for “Best Country Song,” even being nominated in the overall “Song of the Year” category, a rarity for a pure country song (it lost to Norah Jones’ pop/jazz offering, “Don’t Know Why”). “Where Were You (When The World Stopped Turning)” also achieved a most unusual tribute when Georgia Representative Mac Collins entered the lyrics into the United States Congressional Record, citing the song as “an example of how all Americans can help heal our nation from the wounds we suffered on that tragic day.” – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"That's Why I Love You Like I Do"
(written by Jack Morrow and Kelso Herston)

Sonny James (#1, 1972)

Sonny James had a penchant for covering old pop classics, and was very successful at it. Among the ones he released to the country market that became #1 hits for him were Adam Wade's "Take Good Care Of Her," Jo Stafford and Gordon MacRae's "Need You," The Seekers' "I'll Never Find Another You" and "A World Of Our Own," The Chordettes' "Born To Be With You," Roy Orbison's "Only The Lonely," Johnny Preston's "Running Bear," Ivory Joe Hunter's "Since I Met You, Baby," Petula Clark's "My Love," Brook Benton's "It's Just A Matter Of Time" and "Endlessly," Teresa Brewer's "Empty Arms" and Jimmy Reed's "Bright Lights, Cig City." Every one of Sonny James' cover versions of these original pop hits went to #1 on Billboard's country singles chart. James had amassed sixteen consecutive #1 hits (a record at the time), then he yet again covered another old rock classic: Gene Pitney's "Only Love Can Break A Heart," but this time, Sonny's version stopped at #2, ending his chart-topping tally at sixteen.

After "Only Love Can Break A Heart" officially broke the string of number ones, James' only option was to start up a new streak, which he did with his next release "That's Why I Love You Like I Do," returning him to the #1 position on June 24, 1972. This tune wasn't an earlier pop hit like many in Sonny's chart-topping string of sixteen, but it was different in the fact that the song was a re-working of a previous Sonny James release that featured new lyrics co-written by his producer at the time, Kelso Herston. It was first recorded as the "B" side to Sonny's first number one single "Young Love" way back in 1957. Originally, "That's Why I Love You Like I Do" was titled "You're The Reason I'm In Love." Sonny actually liked that song much better than "Young Love," and recommended to Capitol Records' A & R chief Ken Nelson that "You're The Reason I'm In Love" be shipped as the "A" side. Nelson disagreed, but instead of over-ruling James outright, a compromise was struck. The record was shipped without either song being designated as the "A" side, so as to let the radio programmers and deejays decide for themselves which one they wanted to go with. "Young Love" won hands down, and soared to #1 on both the country and pop charts of Billboard Magazine. However, Sonny still believed in "You're The Reason I'm In Love," and decided to save it and try issuing it again as an "A" side when he determined the time was right.

Four years later in 1961, James was ready to release it again, but just before he could do so, Bobby Edwards came out with a country hit called "You're The Reason," (which peaked at #4), so James put his record on hold to avoid confusion. In '63, Sonny felt the time was right again, but Bobby Darin released a pop hit "You're The Reason I'm Living" and he put it off once more. By the time Sonny finally did get around to issuing "You're The Reason I'm In Love" in 1972, the song had evolved into "That's Why I Love You Like I Do." The new version also moved at a faster tempo than the original, and producer Herston even threw in some trumpets which Sonny didn't care for. He described them as "junior high schoolish."

James' re-activated string of #1 singles turned out to be very short-lived. "That's Why I Love You Like I Do" did make it to the top, and so did the follow-up "When The Snow Is On The Roses," another cover of a pop song first recorded by Ed Ames, but then the hit supply dried up. Sonny reached the summit just one more time after that with a cover of an actual country hit this time, Warner Mack's "Is It Wrong (For Loving You)," but it took him over two years to get that last one. While "That's Why I Love You Like I Do" was climbing up the chart in the summer of '72, rumors began flying around Nashville that James was contemplating ending his long association with Capitol Records. Word was out that CBS Records

president Clive Davis had approached Sonny about signing with Columbia. That fall, Capitol president Ken Nelson confided to James that he was retiring, more or less suggesting that Sonny accept Columbia's offer. Unfortunately for Columbia, they signed James at a time when his power as a major hit-maker was diminishing. Although no longer knocking each new release out of the park, Sonny did manage to score sixteen Top Twenty hits for the label, including the two previously-mentioned number ones: "When The Snow Is On The Roses" and "Is It Wrong (For Loving You)." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Amanda"
(written by Bob McDill)

Don Williams (#33, 1973)
Waylon Jennings (#1 country, #54 pop, 1979)

In 1979, Waylon Jennings was scheduled to release a new album titled "Tennessee Waltz," but everyone involved in the project agreed that it didn't have a hit single. In order to meet the schedule, RCA pulled the album, but used the same cover on a "Greatest Hits" release. It was one of the first "best of" packages to feature a single that had not yet been issued. The song was "Amanda," a tune Jennings recorded in 1974 for his "Ramblin' Man" album. The version that was released as a single in 1979 was the same track from '74 but with one line overdubbed: the reference to Waylon's age as being "over thirty and still wearing jeans," in the original was updated to "crowdin' forty," (actually Jennings was 42 at the time of the song's single release). Other than that one-line modification, it's the same cut.

Waylon's version of "Amanda" on the "Ramblin' Man" album wasn't the first appearance of the song, however. Don Williams recorded it as the "B" side of his 1973 single "Come Early Morning." The "A" side went to #12, while "Amanda" earned airplay as well, reaching #33. Songwriter Bob McDill describes the song as an "apology to my wife," but even before Williams' recording attracted attention, McDill had approached Jennings with it. He took "Amanda" over to Waylon's office, but he was out. So Bob left the song at the front desk telling the receptionist to make sure Waylon heard it when he got back, but he never did.

After Don Williams' cut started getting played, Waylon heard it on the radio and called McDill, saying "That's the story of my life, Hoss. Why didn't you give me that song?" Bob told him, "If you look on your receptionist's desk, I'll bet you'll find a copy of it. I tried my best," to which Waylon replied, "Well, I'm gonna record it someday anyway," and the following year he was true to his word. After "Amanda" came out in single form, it vaulted to #1 in just six weeks, reaching that plateau on June 30, 1979 where it stayed for three weeks.

Jennings' "Greatest Hits" package, meanwhile, enjoyed an unusual chart life. The record debuted in Billboard on May 5, 1979, reaching #1 on June 2nd. It remained in the Top Five for over a year, up to July 5, 1980. The album spent fifteen weeks at number one during 1979, and on May 31, 1980 it returned to the top of the chart more than a year after its release. By 1984, Jennings' "Greatest Hits" became the first country album to sell four million units. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"White Lightning"
(written by J. P. Richardson)

George Jones (#1 country, #73 pop, 1959)

George Jones grew up in Beumont, Texas and as a fledgling musician became acquainted with another Beumont resident who was also attempting to build a career in music, Jiles Perry Richardson, who was known as "J. P." around town. Although J. P. leaned more toward the new rock and roll style while George preferred country music, the two men became lifelong friends, which neither one could have guessed that this would be of a very short duration.

Jones signed with Pappy Dailey's Houston-based Starday Records in 1953 and logged his first hit "Why Baby Why" in late 1955. By '57 he had switched to the bigger Mercury label, where Dailey was promotions director, and started recording in Nashville. Meanwhile, Jones' old Starday label had set up additional offices in Nashville and Don Pierce (an original founder and financial partner at the label's headquarters in Houston) was assigned to run the Nashville operation while Dailey remained in Texas, although Dailey still served as George Jones' manager and, when available, his main producer.

J. P. Richardson (adapting the stage moniker "The Big Bopper") had also landed a recording contract with Mercury and in 1958 charted his lone hit, but it was a big one: the pop classic "Chantilly Lace," which J. P. wrote. It reached #6 in Billboard. Jerry Lee Lewis covered "Chantilly Lace" as a country release in 1972 and had a number one record with it. Richardson also composed a couple of other songs around that time that would prove to be huge hits for other artists: "Running Bear" and "White Lightning."

J. P. discovered a Texas nightclub singer by the name of Johnny Preston, and "Running Bear" sent Preston into the Top Ten of the Billboard pop chart, marking his only major hit. Richardson and George Jones even supplied the background vocals on Preston's record. Sonny James covered "Running Bear" in 1970, notching his 12th number one country hit in the process.

Richardson and Jones co-wrote one of George's early Top Ten records, "Treasure Of Love" also in 1958. Jones asked his old friend about recording "White Lightening," to which J. P. replied, "I was saving it for you." After a long road trip, George returned to Nashville eager to record "White Lightning," and he approached Don Pierce about booking time at Owen Bradley's Quonset Hut studio to cut the song. Then tragedy struck.

With the success of "Chantilly Lace," The Big Bopper joined fellow rock performers Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and Dion and the Belmonts for a "Winter Dance Party" tour starting on January 23, 1959. On the eleventh night of the tour (February 2nd), the musicians played the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa. Holly, tired of riding on a bus from show to show, had chartered a plane to their next performance the following evening in Moorhead, Minnesota. Originally, the plane's passengers were to be Holly and his bandmates Waylon Jennings and Tommy Allsup. In a coin toss, Valens won Allsup's seat on the plane, and Jennings gave up his seat to Richardson, who was suffering from the flu and didn't want to ride the cold, uncomfortable bus to Moorhead. A few minutes after takeoff, the plane crashed in a cornfield near Mason City, Iowa killing the three rock stars instantly.

Just one week after the crash, George Jones appeared at Nashville's Quonset Hut to record "White Lightning" on February 9, 1959. He was highly inebriated, reportedly still in shock from his old friend J. P. Richardson's death the week before. The arrangement on "White Lightning" called for a galloping bass riff to kick off the song, played by Buddy Killen. At the time, Buddy was one of the top session bass players in Nashville, but ultimately gave up session work to devote all his time to running Tree Publishing Company which, under Killen's leadership, came to surpass Acuff-Rose and Cedarwood as Nashville's premiere song publishing company by the mid-1960s.

At the session, Jones was so drunk that it was nearly impossible to get an acceptable recording from him on "White Lightning." He flubbed take after take to the point that Buddy's fingertips were bleeding and developing blisters from him having to play that opening bass riff on the song's intro over and over. He placed Band-Aids on his fingers to relieve the pain. After the 11th take (which Jones again flubbed), Killen said his fingers couldn't take it anymore. He not only threatened to quit the session, but also offered to impose bodily harm on George for being drunk. Buddy's thoughts were well-founded. It was very inconsiderate of Jones, or anybody else, to show up at a session drunk. Apparently George didn't learn anything from that 1959 encounter with Killen, as he continued this practice for decades. Twenty-one years later, Jones was again drunk when he appeared at the Quonset Hut (by then called "Columbia Studio B") to record "He Stopped Loving Her Today." However, technology had advanced enough by 1980 that producer Billy Sherrill could piece it all together electronically, and assemble a flawless track of that enduring classic.

Producer Don Pierce decided to go back and see what they had so far and he discovered that on the third take, Jones made it all the way through "White Lightning," and flubbed only one word, "slug," toward the end of the song (George slurred the word, pronouncing it "ss-sslug"). Because that was the only noticeable mistake, the third cut was deemed acceptable for release and Killen's fingers could start to heal. Other than the one minor flaw, it was a great recording otherwise, featuring not only Buddy's sensational dog house bass intro but Floyd Jenkins' fabulous guitar work and Hargus "Pig" Robbins' rollicking, barrelhouse piano. Working sessions since 1957, this is the one that first brought Pig to prominence as a key session player. In retrospect, George's error on "White Lightning" probably made the record an even bigger hit. For the remainder of his career, in subsequent live performances of the song during concerts, Jones would intentionally over-emphasize his mis-pronunciation of the word as a comedic gesture, which audiences loved.

Years later, with fences mended, Jones apologized to Killen for showing up at the "White Lightning" session in such a horrible condition. In George's autobiography "I Lived To Tell It All," he claims that he doesn't remember the session at all and asked Buddy how many times they had to re-do the song. Reportedly, Killen said, "over 80 times, 83 to be exact." Well, personally, I think Buddy was just trying to be funny and sarcastic at the same time by picking an unrealistic number. Producer Don Pierce's remembrance of eleven takes with the third one selected is more believable.

"White Lightning" entered Billboard's country singles chart on March 9, 1959 and ascended to the number one position on April 13th. It also provided Jones his best showing (of five appearances) on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart at #73. In country, the record remained at the top for five weeks (whereas "He Stopped Loving Her Today" held the summit for just one week). Two years later, George Jones achieved his greatest chart success with "Tender Years," which held the number one position for seven non-consecutive weeks beginning August 21, 1961 and set the standard for his terrific ballads that were to become the hallmark of his career. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Near You"
(written by Francis Craig & Kermit Goell)

George Jones and Tammy Wynette (#1, 1977)

On June 26, 1968 Edwin Craig passed away in Nashville. Craig was the chairman of the board of the National Life and Accident Insurance Company in 1925 when its subsidiary WSM-AM went on the air. A few months later, he gave final approval to a new program called "The WSM Barn Dance," which evolved into "The Grand Ole Opry." Edwin Craig was a cousin of Francis Craig, who in 1947 co-wrote and recorded a song called "Near You," which holds the all-time record for most weeks at #1 on Billboard's pop chart (seventeen). The following year it was selected as the theme song for television's "The Milton Berle Show."

On December 12, 1974, "Near You" became the very last song that George Jones and Tammy Wynette would record as husband and wife. Their tumultuous six-year union had reached an all-time low, and the session that day at Columbia Studio B was extremely tense. The two weren't speaking to each other at that point, and they were just barely making it through the songs. George would intentionally try to throw Tammy off by not singing anything the same way twice, making it nearly impossible for Tammy to phrase with him. Jones' little stunts like that made the work very difficult for everyone involved, not just for Wynette but for producer Billy Sherrill, the musicians and the engineers as well. The December 12th session was a miserable experience for all. So much so that the usually unflappable Sherrill thought to himself, "God, this has got to stop."

It did stop, and rather abruptly. That night, George and Tammy returned to their home on Franklin Road around midnight. As they went to sleep, Jones promised that everything would work out all right, but the next morning, shortly after Wynette left the house for a dental appointment, Jones moved out for good. That was December 13, 1974. The following March 13th, their divorce became final and Tammy didn't see George again until October of '75. Their recording of "Near You" was held "in the can" for a couple of years, but six months after "Golden Ring" reached the summit of Billboard's country singles chart, "Near You" was issued and sailed to the top spot as well, on February 4, 1977, where it stayed for two weeks. Another follow-up, "Southern California" reached #5.

Several years after their divorce, cooler heads prevailed and the two did record together again. In the early part of 1980, George and Tammy teamed up for a reunion album and it netted one last big hit: "Two Story House" which peaked at #2. A final teaming in the spring of 1995 (just three years before Tammy's death at the age of only 55) produced their album called "One" and the title track was issued as a single but this song didn't become a hit. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Why Not Me"
(written by Harlan Howard, Sonny Throckmorton & Brent Maher)

The Judds (#1, 1984)

A long and winding road finally led Wynonna and Naomi Judd to a signing with the RCA label and a huge success in the summer of 1984 with the Kenny O'Dell song "Mama He's Crazy," the duo's first #1 hit. The song was the centerpiece of their first introductory album release, actually a "mini-LP" containing just six songs. After "Mama He's Crazy" reached the summit on Billboard's country singles chart, RCA set them to work on a full album. After assembling material, producer Brent Maher felt they still needed something with a strong, mid-tempo groove, and he turned to legendary songwriter Harlan Howard.

Harlan wanted to go fishing, but instead they decided to set up a Sunday writing session at Howard's home. They didn't have any strong ideas, and Harlan suggested they call Sonny Throckmorton, who had recently moved from Texas back to Nashville and lived just a few blocks away. Sonny protested ("Man, this is Sunday!"), but he came over as a favor to Harlan. He brought along the foundations of "Why Not Me." Throckmorton had developed the melody months earlier, and had attempted to write it as "How 'Bout Me" but never could get anything. He set it aside and forgot about it, until that day at Harlan Howard's house.

Meanwhile, Howard remembered hearing a couple of previously issued tunes called "What About Me," one by Don Gibson way back in 1961, and a more recent 1973 release by Anne Murray. Both of these singles had reached the Top 30, but by 1984 very few people remembered them, especially the Gibson cut. However, Harlan was still familiar with those recordings and used that title as the basis to come up with "Why Not Me," but he still had doubts about it. He felt that "Why Not Me" wasn't a great title, nor were "What About Me" or "How 'Bout Me" for that matter. Howard explained it this way: "To get a really good record, you've got to write a truly exceptional song when you're dealing with an average title. The only thing I know to do with songs like 'Why Not Me' and 'Busted' – which I never thought was a good title – is to put the title in there often so that people remember it. The weaker the title, the more you gotta hear it." Harlan (who died in 2002) would be appalled by today's barrage of low-caliber songs with weak titles and meaningless lyrics that are becoming huge hits in this modern world of sub-standard country music.

Howard created the lyrics to "Why Not Me" around the Judds' personalities, rather than any real-life events. Maher and Throckmorton pieced together the musical elements and assembled a demo. At the session, Brent presented it to session player Don Potter, who immediately developed a "bent note" sound on his guitar that became the signature of the instrumental hook. Producer Maher also devised another unusual texture. He had an idea for "thumps" to be placed on the back beat during the song, and instructed keyboardist Bobby Ogdin to develop the particular sound he wanted with a guitar, not a drum. Ogden thus tied a rag around the strings of a six-string guitar (to keep them from ringing), and began experimenting in order to come up with the right-sounding "thumps." He thumped with his thumb in various places on the front of the guitar – ending up on the upper side just above the sound hole – to get the perfect tone for the track. This additional component in the record's sound also aided in the final results: The Judds' second number one single in a row (reaching the summit December 22, 1984), their second consecutive Grammy award, and 1985's "Single Of The Year" trophy from the Country Music Association. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Wolverton Mountain"
(written by Merle Kilgore & Claude King)

Claude King (#1 country, #6 pop, 1962)

Merle Kilgore often said that, although he was born in Oklahoma and raised in Shreveport, Louisiana, his real roots were planted in the Arkansas Ozarks. His mother and grandmother had been born in those mountains, and most of his relatives called those wooded lands home. Kilgore started playing guitar at a very young age, and began writing songs as a teenager. By the time he turned eighteen in 1954, one of his songs made it into the hands of Webb Pierce. "More and More" became a #1 hit for Pierce, and reached #7 when Charley Pride covered it in 1983.

Obtaining a spot on the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport, Merle not only sang, but became the top accompanist for many of the show's best-known acts. A master showman, he was a crowd favorite. Very outgoing, Kilgore made friends easily, and soon found himself on the road with the likes of Faron Young, Webb Pierce, Jim Reeves and Elvis Presley. He continued to work the Hayride through the fifties, but by the end of the decade was contemplating taking a big chance and changing the course of his career. In 1959 Kilgore took some time off and drove up to Arkansas to visit his uncle and aunt. He wasn't sure if he should give up the career that he had built thus far, just to move to Nashville and try to make it there. Merle wondered if that was too big a risk. He trusted his Uncle Clifton a great deal and wanted to discuss his predicament with him.

Merle's Uncle Clifton lived on the same mountain where Kilgore's mother and grandmother had been born. There was a peace as well as a sense of belonging that Merle felt when he walked the long trails and studied the picturesque vistas of Woolverton (the mountain's actual spelling). Here, the pace was slow and the people were honest. It was the perfect setting not only to reflect on life, but also to gain insight and inspiration. As Kilgore spent time at the old place, he began to think about the mountain and his uncle's simple, but rewarding life. Grabbing his guitar and a pen, Merle wrote a song that he called "Clifton Clowers" (his uncle's name). When he finished the piece, he went looking for his uncle, finding him out in a cane field making sorghum molasses. Kilgore sat down right there and played him the new song. When he finished, Uncle Clifton smiled and told Merle, "Son, you just wrote yourself a hit."

Confident that everyone else would have the same reaction as Uncle Clifton, Kilgore raced back to Shreveport and played it for one of his best friends, Johnny Horton. Johnny listened to "Clifton Clowers," shook his head and said "that is probably the worst song I have ever heard." Kilgore was taken aback by Horton's response. Usually Johnny loved his material. Still, Merle didn't give up on his latest composition. The songwriter simply went looking for someone else with a recording contract. The next singer Merle ran into was George Jones. He started playing it for Jones, but this time Kilgore didn't even finish before George cut in. "I hate mountain songs," he said. Again and again Merle tried, but no one wanted to take a chance on "Clifton Clowers."

In 1960, Merle finally took the plunge and moved to Nashville, bringing along his guitar, his songs and his uncle's blessing. Quickly landing a recording contract at Starday, Merle managed to chart with three releases. One of those records even landed in the top ten, but none of them established Kilgore as a solo act, so Merle went back to songwriting and opening for better-known performers. He also began to dabble in acting. One day Kilgore received a call from Tillman Franks. Franks had previously managed

Johnny Horton, but after Johnny was killed in a car wreck on November 5, 1960, Tillman had picked up another young singer from Shreveport named Claude King. Merle was familiar with King, as he had been a local sports star while Kilgore was still in high school. After college, King returned home and had become a fairly popular folk singer in the area. He was a solid performer who had even scored a couple of Top Ten hits in 1961 on the Columbia label: “Big River, Big Man” and “The Comancheros.”

Tillman Franks told Merle that he was planning to do a folk-style album with King. Folk music was really hot at the time and with the right songs, it was hoped that a top-selling album might be produced. Franks asked Kilgore if he remembered a mountain song that he had once played for Johnny Horton. Merle fabricated the story somewhat and said that not only did he remember it, but Johnny had loved it! So Kilgore dug up “Clifton Clowers” and took it over to Franks. Claude King listened to it and thought it had some potential, but he wanted to make a few changes. Merle gave King the authorization to proceed. After Claude adjusted some of the lyrics, he decided to record the number. When Kilgore found out that he was going to cut it, Merle gave Claude half of the songwriting credit because of the changes he made.

One of the most noticeable changes King made was the song’s title. No longer was it “Clifton Clowers.” He had retitled it “Wolverton Mountain,” (removing one of the o’s from the mountain’s actual spelling). Released in mid-spring of 1962, it grabbed the top spot in June, holding it for nine weeks on Billboard’s country chart. On the pop listing, the record also made a strong showing, peaking at #6. Not only did “Wolverton Mountain” become the most important country folk song of its era, but it captured the imagination of thousands of people worldwide. Suddenly the state of Arkansas was being flooded by calls from people all over the world wanting to know how they could get to Wolverton Mountain. It was a media frenzy and the reporters made the most of it. Kilgore’s Uncle Clifton was not only receiving scores of phone calls and letters, he did interviews with correspondents from all over the world. He had his picture taken with literally thousands of tourists. The song made him a celebrity and created a rush of traffic on U. S. Highway 65 for years afterward. The mountain is located just north of Morrilton, Arkansas in Conway County.

Clifton Clowers would continue to live on Woolverton Mountain for the rest of his life. When he died at age 102 in 1994, newspapers all over the world ran his obituary. His nephew Merle Kilgore toured the globe, singing, acting and lecturing. He wrote another country classic soon afterward – Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire” in 1963, in which he shared songwriting credit with June Carter, although it’s generally known that Kilgore composed the song himself, written about the burgeoning romantic relationship between Carter and Johnny Cash. As a favor to his friend Cash, Merle authorized June’s name to be placed on “Ring of Fire” as co-writer because of her strong link to Johnny’s career. Later, Kilgore also became the longtime manager of Hank Williams, Jr., receiving the “Manager of the Year” award from the Country Music Association in 1990.

The song which Kilgore wrote about his uncle warned, “They say don’t go on Wolverton Mountain.” Yet, it seems few people took those words seriously. “Wolverton Mountain” was revisited several times after Claude King first took listeners there. Dickey Lee had a record on it just weeks after King’s version came out. Bing Crosby also cut the song, as did Nat King Cole and Louis Armstrong. Hank Williams, Jr. included a reference to it in one of his own hits (paying homage to writer Kilgore). And, before his death in 2005, Merle often went back there to reflect, find a little peace and a lot of inspiration. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Tennessee Waltz"
(written by Pee Wee King & Redd Stewart)

Pee Wee King (#3 country, #30 pop, 1948)
Cowboy Copus (#3 country, 1948)
Roy Acuff (#12 country, 1948)
Patti Page (#1 pop, #2 country, 1950)
Pee Wee King (re-issue, #6 country, 1951)
Lacy J. Dalton (#18 country, 1980)

The co-writer of one of country music's most enduring songs and one of the record industry's all-time blockbuster hits had as unlikely a background of any person who has ever reached country music stardom and subsequent induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Julius Frank Anthony Kuczynski, the son of a violinist, was a city lad born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He was a mechanical draftsman by trade, but from his youth his passion was music. By fourteen he had already formed his own group and was playing fiddle and accordion at polka dances. He soon began appearing on radio as well. Bitten hard by the entertainment bug, Julius gave up on a career as a draftsman and left home while still in his teens. Moving to Louisville, Kentucky, he landed a job with the Gene Autry Show.

By 1934 Kuczynski had become completely immersed in country music. Sensing that Julius Frank Anthony Kuczynski was not a great name for a hillbilly act, he started going by Frankie King. While performing on the "Crazy Water Barn Dance," King would meet another young man who would become one of his best friends and his closest and most-trusted musical advisor.

Redd Stewart was a talented Kentucky native who sang and was adept at several instruments as well, including guitar, piano and fiddle. Stewart had performed with a number of local Louisville groups for several years when King, now going by the name of Pee Wee instead of Frankie, was forming his Golden West Cowboys band. In 1935 Redd was one of the first men King hired for the Cowboys. Over the course of the next two decades, Stewart would play every instrument in his friend's band and sing lead vocal on most of the group's notable hits.

Less than a year after they first played together, the Golden West Cowboys had developed such a strong following that they were invited to leave Louisville and move their show to Nashville's Grand Ole Opry. The group would remain WSM regulars for over a decade. Sensing that this was a prime opportunity, Pee Wee branched out. He traveled to Hollywood and appeared in cowboy movies. He also took his band to both coasts and appeared on several national radio shows. With their polish and shine as well as their solid dance numbers, the Cowboys were favorites wherever they worked. Despite some personnel changes, the group remained popular throughout the war years too. When World War II ended, Pee Wee was ready to really take them to the top. He was determined to get the Golden West Cowboys the one thing they lacked: a nationally-charted record.

In the mid-1940s King collaborated with Stewart to write "Bonaparte's Retreat." After that mild success, the two began to write together more often. They found that some of their most productive hours as songwriters occurred during the long stretches on the road between gigs. It was on one of those arduous trips in 1946 that Pee Wee caught magic and fleshed it out into a song. King and Stewart were listening to the radio late one night as they crossed the Texas/Arkansas border and they heard Bill

Monroe's "Kentucky Waltz" come on the radio (which was a top country hit at the time) and Redd noted an irony. He wondered aloud why no one had ever written a waltz about Tennessee. King thought about that for a few moments and suggested that it was probably just an oversight. He also was of the belief that he and Redd should take advantage of that oversight before someone else did. Turning the radio down, Redd grabbed the matchbox he had used to light his last cigar. Pulling a pen from the glove box, he waited for King to share his thoughts. Pee Wee said, "Why don't we just add words to the 'No Name Waltz?'" Stewart quickly agreed.

An untitled melody had been the band's theme song for years. Pee Wee and Redd always called it the "No Name Waltz." Amazingly, the two men had never considered writing lyrics to the song until that night. Now as the Arkansas countryside flew by, they wondered why they had waited so long to add words to the old tune. With only the dome light to see by, King and Stewart wrote the lyrics to the sad song about a dance and a lost love. When they arrived in Nashville the following morning, they turned it over to Fred Rose of Acuff-Rose publishing company. Rose adjusted just one line of the song, changing "Oh the Tennessee Waltz, Oh the Tennessee Waltz" to "I remember the night and the Tennessee Waltz."

King started using "Tennessee Waltz" in his live shows and it quickly became a concert favorite. A considerable amount of time passed before Pee Wee's group was able to cut the song, their recording being made in a December 2, 1947 session at the RCA Victor Studio in Chicago (RCA's Nashville facility was still over a decade in the future). The record reached #3 on Billboard's country listings (the chart was then known as "Best Selling Folk Retail Records") and finished at #30 on the pop chart.

Meanwhile, others took note of "Tennessee Waltz's" natural appeal and headed to the recording studios to make their own versions of it. This was a common practice in those days. Sometimes there would be several versions of a song by different artists on the market at the same time. King's original version turned up on the charts first, in April of '48, and just one month later Lloyd "Cowboy" Copus (ironically, a former member of Pee Wee's Golden West Cowboys) had his own version of "Tennessee Waltz" on the charts as well. It too peaked at #3. Then Roy Acuff released the song in November, pushing his record to #12. Yet all of these successful releases paled in comparison to what would transpire two years later.

Patti Page had been recording for the Mercury label since 1947 and had scored with several pretty good-sized hits, even notching a million-selling single, "With My Eyes Wide Open, I'm Dreaming." In October, 1950 Patti entered the studio to cut a Christmas tune called "Boogie Woogie Santa Claus," but she needed a "B" side for the holiday release. Instead of choosing another Christmas number, she selected "Tennessee Waltz" because the country hit two years earlier had been a favorite song of her father's. Jerry Wexler, a record reviewer for Billboard Magazine, helped Page secure the sheet music for "Tennessee Waltz," which was forwarded on to Patti's manager and orchestra leader Jack Rael. The stage was now set for a history-making event.

At the time, Mercury's New York studio had just started experimenting with a primitive form of multi-track recording and when Patti Page arrived at the session, she discovered that the plan was for her to be a "guinea pig" of sorts because her assignment was to sing a duet with herself! "Tennessee Waltz" was determined to be the perfect song for this endeavor. First, a track was laid down with Patti singing the lead, then a completely different recording was made with her singing the harmony lines (years later, Skeeter Davis would use a more-modernized version of this technique to great success at Nashville's RCA Victor studio). After blending the two tracks together, Patti's producers felt that her new

recording had a “pleasant” feel to it and believed that “Tennessee Waltz” could perhaps become a modest seller based simply on the new voice-over harmony gimmick. Mercury’s promotions department had completely underestimated it and was totally caught off guard by the tidal wave that was about to hit.

The “A” side, “Boogie Woogie Santa Claus,” was entirely ignored (even though the record had been released during the height of the Christmas season), but after “Tennessee Waltz” made its chart debut on November 10, 1950, it shot to #1 in Billboard Magazine’s December 30th issue. The song would remain at the top for thirteen of its thirty weeks on the pop chart. After the first pressings, “Boogie Woogie Santa Claus” was quickly replaced on the record by a song called “Long Long Ago,” with “Tennessee Waltz” now designated as the “A” side.

Patti Page’s version of “Tennessee Waltz” also showed impressive numbers on Billboard’s country charts as well. Pee Wee King observed that former Golden West Cowboy Eddy Arnold had already bridged the gap between country and pop, and now with “Tennessee Waltz,” Page was reversing this trend by bringing her pop sound back to country! Patti’s record reached #2 on the country side and stayed there for three weeks, unable to crawl over Tennessee Ernie Ford’s “Shotgun Boogie,” which was maintaining its fourteen week hold on the #1 position.

Sensing the power of “Tennessee Waltz,” an onslaught of other artists raced to record it. New versions showed up seemingly each week. In pop music, Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians, Les Paul and Mary Ford, Jo Stafford, Spike Jones, The Fontane Sisters and Anita Day all released singles on it in 1951 alone! Three of those cuts made the Top Ten. In country, RCA re-released Pee Wee King’s version, which made it to #6 the second time around. This set the stage for King’s runaway smash later that year, “Slow Poke,” which ranks sixteenth on Billboard’s all-time country hit list.

“Tennessee Waltz” quickly became one of the most powerful moneymakers in music history. In the nearly seventy years since it was written, the song has been recorded by literally hundreds of performers. With sales of over six million copies, Patti Page’s version of “Tennessee Waltz” is the all-time best-selling single ever recorded by a female artist. It is also the sixth best-selling pop single released before 1954, and three of the songs ahead of it have an unfair advantage because they are perennial Christmas classics. In 1965 “Tennessee Waltz” was named an official state song of Tennessee (one of an eventual nine, the most of any state.) – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“Lookin’ For Love”
(written by Bob Morrison, Wanda Mallette and Patti Ryan)

Johnny Lee (#1 country, #5 pop, 1980)

It took the combined efforts of two schoolteachers, a publishing veteran and an unknown Texas club singer to turn out a song which came to signify a new era in country music. In early 1980 these four unique and distinct personalities would be brought together through a song that would become the centerpiece of one of the era’s hottest movies. Without “Lookin’ For Love” and the movie “Urban

Cowboy" leading the way, the country dance craze which inundated country music throughout the 1980s and into the early '90s might never have gained a national foothold.

Like so many college students in the days of Vietnam protests and left-wing marches, Patti Ryan was backpacking all over Europe in 1976 trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Nearing the end of her money and travel time, she overheard the Eagles' "Lyin' Eyes" playing on a radio as she hitched a ride to Austria. "I can do that," she thought as she rolled the song's words and melody over again and again in her mind. "I can write music."

There was some foundation for Patti's newfound dream. Her mother was a public school music teacher, and as a teenager Ryan had performed in school bands as well as with several local bands. The fact was that the young college graduate had been around music all her life, and therefore thought she understood the essence of what made a hit. Beyond this very elementary concept and very casual experience, she had nothing else but enthusiasm from which to draw. Yet, as fate would have it, returning to the States she discovered that her older brother Chuck had opened a recording studio in Mississippi. He was working mainly on advertising jingles, but he was making contacts in other areas too. Patti showed an interest in Chuck's line of work and he introduced his younger sister to another songwriting wanna-be, Wanda Mallette, a local second-grade teacher. Wanda and Patti quickly discovered common ground in both their goals and dreams.

As soon as Patti found a job as an art teacher, she and Wanda devoted all their spare moments away from their classrooms to learning and honing the craft of songwriting. After they had progressed to the point where they felt comfortable sharing their collaborations, they contacted Wanda's old high school friend Bob Morrison. Bob had formed his own Nashville-based publishing company, and word was out that he was scouting fresh talent. The two ladies sent Morrison a few tunes they had written. As it turned out, the first group of songs weren't very good, but Morrison saw some potential there. He encouraged Patti and Wanda to keep working at it.

The two labored together and separately for several weeks on a host of different ideas. Then one day, after reading a children's book, Wanda mentioned a new concept to Patti: an idea about "looking for love." Patti kept thinking about the song idea and one night she was driving home from her evening class at Southern Mississippi College. It was raining hard and the windshield wipers were beating out a rhythm as they tried to keep up with the pouring torrents. It was during those moments that she began to really hear the song. Patti outlined the chorus in the car during the storm. She called Wanda immediately after arriving home, and the next day the rest of "Lookin' For Love" came together pretty quickly.

"Lookin' For Love" was included in the second package of songs which Ryan and Mallette sent to Bob Morrison. On his first run-through of this new batch of material, he noted that they had improved a great deal. Morrison especially liked what the two ladies had done with the "Lookin' For Love" number. He felt particularly drawn to the wording, but he believed that the tune didn't sound enough like "Nashville" to sell. Bob recommended that they get rid of the seventh and minor chords. Patti and Wanda felt strongly about their melody, but they bowed to the pro and let Bob rework it for them. Three weeks later, Morrison was shopping the demo.

For the better part of a year "Lookin' For Love" was welcomed in and then booted out of recording studios all over Nashville. Universally, producers and artists alike didn't care for the song. Almost two dozen rejected it outright. Others simply dumped it in the trash without comment. Still, Morrison

refused to give up. He forwarded it to a friend on the West Coast. From there, it found its way to Irving Azoff, a Los Angeles-based producer/manager who wanted to create a double-sided country music sound track for a film that would soon be shooting in a honky-tonk named Gilley's just outside of Houston, Texas. Azoff tossed the demo in a box of songs from Combine Music Publishing and sent it to the filming location in Houston. That was where Johnny Lee entered the picture.

Lee had been a locally-popular regular performer at Gilley's for years, and the film's director wanted to use him in the movie to establish some authentic club background and flavor. Lee's role would be small, a brief background cameo as he performed with his band. Still, rather than assign the song that Johnny was to do, the crew simply gave him the box of Combine demos and told him to pick his favorite. The first one Lee found that he liked was the one Music City had rejected: "Lookin' For Love."

Meanwhile, Patti and Wanda were completely in the dark in Mississippi. They had no idea that their song had been picked up and was about to be used in a big-budget movie. Morrison called Ryan at home late one night to pass along some sketchy information he had received about this. Bob didn't know any details, other than the picture was being shot at Gilley's Nightclub in Houston, Texas. So Patti and Wanda called a mutual friend in Houston who confirmed that a movie was indeed being filmed at Gilley's. A few days later when spring break arrived, the two songwriters packed their bags, loaded them into Patti's VW and drove all night to Texas. Conning their way onto the "Urban Cowboy" location set, they walked in just as the crew was filming Johnny Lee singing "Lookin' For Love."

When Johnny performed the song with cameras rolling, the film crew literally went crazy. The writers re-wrote an entire segment of the script just to feature the number. In order to make room for "Lookin' For Love," they bumped the Waylon Jennings/Willie Nelson mega-hit "Mammas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys," which had been out about a year at the time. As the final rushes of "Urban Cowboy" were finally pieced together, the Ryan, Mallette and Morrison song became the movie's theme, thus causing the rewriting and refilming of the picture's last twenty minutes.

"Urban Cowboy" became one of the biggest box-office hits of 1980, beginning the craze that led to the monumental expansion of country music's demographic base and the explosion in popularity of the nation's country music nightclubs. "Lookin' For Love" launched club singer Johnny Lee's career in a big way, staying atop Billboard's country singles chart for three weeks beginning September 6, 1980 and reaching a phenomenal #5 on Billboard's Hot 100 pop chart. The cut also propelled Ryan and Mallette's songwriting careers. Their follow-up composition, "Just Another Woman In Love" reached #1 for Anne Murray in 1984. Other songs which Ryan co-wrote did very well too, such as Moe Bandy's #8 hit "Americana" in 1988 and Lorrie Morgan's "Out Of Your Shoes" in 1989, which peaked at #2.

So with a song that no one wanted, two women, a fledgling publisher and an unknown singer started a musical revolution. And in a twist of irony that only Patti Ryan could fully appreciate, the song that provided her first hit single had been married to the initial inspiration for her taking up songwriting: On the "B" side of the "Urban Cowboy" single of "Lookin' For Love" was the Eagles' "Lyin' Eyes." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Coal Miner's Daughter"
(written by Loretta Lynn)

Loretta Lynn (#1 country, #83 pop – 1970)

"Coal Miner's Daughter" is a song detailing Loretta Lynn's childhood in "Butcher Hollow" (she pronounced it "Holler") which was located near the Eastern Kentucky town of Paintsville. It is the most significant record of her career. The song became her fourth #1 single, the title of a best-selling autobiography (co-authored by New York Times writer George Vecsey), and the title of an Academy-Award winning movie in 1980 starring Sissy Spacek and Tommy Lee Jones.

Loretta had wanted to write a song about her youth for many years, and she got the opportunity while waiting to do some work on a local television show at the WSIX-TV studios in Nashville. During a break in taping, with nothing better to do, she headed to her dressing room and began writing off the top of her head. Within the hour, she had fashioned a rough draft of "Coal Miner's Daughter" that included nine verses!

When Loretta appeared at Nashville's famed Quonset Hut studio to record the song on October 1, 1969, it was determined that nine verses would make the recording much too long for a successful release as a single, so her longtime producer Owen Bradley helped her trim it up. Three verses were eliminated: a remembrance of an interior-decorating endeavor at Loretta's log-cabin home, one about the frequent Kentucky floods, and another regarding a "hog-killing day". These verses were deleted, and the finished recording timed out at 3:02, very manageable for radio airplay during that period in country music.

Several lines in the song had grammatical problems, but no changes were made to those. In the very first line, Loretta sings "I was borned a coal miner's daughter." Another has her singing "the work we done was hard, at night we'd sleep 'cause we were "tard" (instead of pronouncing it "tired"). Bradley explained that he let Loretta sing it her own way without correcting her because that was the way she spoke, and since the song was autobiographical in nature anyway, Owen thought that Loretta's Eastern Kentucky dialect should be left in.

After the session was completed, Loretta had second thoughts, feeling that "Coal Miner's Daughter" was too personal to be released as a single, so she held it back for a full year. But after reconsidering, she finally gave the go-ahead and the song shipped as a single on October 5, 1970. It reached #1 on December 19th.

Following the record's success, Loretta stated that the song "proved to everybody that she could write about something else besides marriage problems." It inspired both a book and a movie of the same title (as mentioned above), and Loretta's original recording was inducted into the Grammy Hall Of Fame in 1998, as well as induction into The Library Of Congress's "National Recording Registry" in 2010, the highest honor a recording can achieve. It also placed #185 on the Recording Industry Association Of America's list of the "Greatest Songs Of The 20th Century," based on cultural and historical significance. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

”Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses”
(written by Paul and Gene Nelson)

Kathy Mattea (#1, 1988)

Brothers Paul and Gene Nelson wrote “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” about their aunt and uncle, Hop and Louise Langley of Washington, North Carolina. Whenever the Nelson brothers visited the Langley household in their youth, Hop was usually on the road, and Louise frequently spoke of the day when he could retire and trade in his truck for a Winnebago. Once he received his gold watch, the Langleys did just that, and in 1985, Paul and Gene (now writing songs in Nashville) decided the final drive of a retiring trucker could provide an interesting storyline. They concocted the title, then left it for a year, finally completing “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” in 1986. In the process, they substituted their uncle’s name, “Charlie” in place of Hop.

Pat Higdon of Warner Bros. Music put together a lengthy tape of the Nelsons’ material, and gave it to Kathy Mattea, who found “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” in the middle. Kathy then played several of the songs for her producer Allen Reynolds. She told Reynolds that she liked “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” best, and after hearing the tape, he agreed that it was a winner. Mattea assumed that with the “truckin’” theme, a man would be chosen to record it, but to Kathy’s surprise, Reynolds suggested that she cut it.

Just like the earlier Reynolds-produced hit, Crystal Gayle’s “Don’t It Make My Brown Eyes Blue,” Kathy Mattea’s recording of “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” went down in one take. “It was no problem,” Allen recalls. “It just fell right into place, and when we came in and listened to the playback, everybody said ‘yeah, that’s the only cut we’re gonna need.’ Kathy said, ‘that was easy, what’s next?’ It’s a funny thing how some of those special ones come together just that way.”

“Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” was placed on Mattea’s “Untasted Honey” album, released in October of 1987. The first single, “Goin’ Gone” was shipped, but even while that song was breaking out (and would go on to become a #1 hit), radio programmers all over the country picked up on “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” and began playing it off the album (in those days that was still a common practice, before consultants began pre-programming the music). The response was so great that a campaign began, recommending that “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” be the follow-up single once “Goin’ Gone” finished its run. And so it was. Mercury quickly issued “Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” as a single, and in no time at all it had sailed into the #1 position on Billboard’s country chart on May 21, 1988. At the time the record peaked, Kathy was on tour with her band in Europe. “When we left, things were normal,” she told Neil Pond of Music City News Magazine, “but when we got back, the phones were smokin’ and everybody was going nuts.”

“Eighteen Wheels And A Dozen Roses” earned “Single Record Of The Year” honors from both the Country Music Association and the Academy Of Country Music, and the ACM also named it “Song Of The Year.” In addition, the title appeared in the dialogue of the movie “Rain Man,” which won for Dustin Hoffman his second “Best Actor” Oscar. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Convoy"
(written by Bill Fries and Chip Davis)

C. W. McCall (#1 country, #1 pop, 1975)

Recently I mentioned this song "Convoy" in my earlier backstory regarding Waylon Jennings' 1977 smash "Luckenbach, Texas (Back To The Basics Of Love)," explaining that six weeks at #1 had been the highest tally achieved by a country song during the decade of the 1970s, and that only three records had accomplished this. In addition to "Luckenbach, Texas," the others were Freddie Hart's "My Hang Up Is You" in 1972 and the song I'm writing about today: C. W. McCall's "Convoy."

Bill Fries of Audobon, Iowa was working as a $40,000-a-year advertising executive for Bozell & Jacobs in Omaha, Nebraska when he first developed the characters of C. W. McCall and the truck-stop waitress, Mavis. Their commercials for Old Home Bread won a "Clio" award (given for advertising), and the song "Old Home Filler-Up An' Keep On-A-Truckin' Café" rose to #19 on the Billboard country charts in 1974. Fries continued working for Bozell & Jacobs, but he also pursued his secondary musical career, reaching #12 with "Wolf Creek Pass" and #13 with "Classified," all released under his "C. W. McCall" moniker. In June of 1975, he was listening to his CB radio when he got the idea for "Convoy," taking advantage of a growing fad. Nine months later, some 3.5 million CB operators were transmitting signals across the U. S., and some of them no doubt picked up on the trend after hearing McCall's hit.

The record's success was phenomenal. "Convoy" debuted on Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart on November 29, 1975, soared to #1 in its fourth week on December 20th and remained at the top for six full weeks. At the same time, the record was climbing the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart. It reached the summit there on January 10, 1976, becoming the seventh and last single to top both the country and pop charts during the 1970s (the others to do this were Charlie Rich's "The Most Beautiful Girl" in 1973, Billy Swan's "I Can Help" in 1974, Freddy Fender's "Before The Next Teardrop Falls" in 1975 and two by John Denver: "Thank God I'm A Country Boy" and "I'm Sorry," also in '75). "Convoy" ultimately sold more than seven million copies and Billboard named it the number one country single of the year for 1976. Two years later, the song provided the basis for the movie "Convoy," starring Kris Kristofferson and Ali McGraw.

C. W. McCall's release of "Convoy" wasn't quite the last of his big records. He turned up at #2 with one final hit in 1977: another recitation called "Roses For Mama." After his music career ended, McCall was elected mayor of Olathe, Colorado. His collaborator in the writing of almost all of his chart entries was Chip Davis, who also organized the sessions and recruited the musicians which produced these hits. If the name Chip Davis sounds familiar, it's because of a New Age act he established and developed a few years after his association with C. W. McCall. This act has proved highly successful, especially around Christmastime. It's known as "Mannheim Steamroller," and amazingly, many of the musicians that make up this highly unorthodox group also performed on the McCall sessions back in the '70s. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Somebody Should Leave"
(written by Harlan Howard and Chick Rains)

Reba McEntire (#1, 1985)

Reba McEntire began to come into her own as a recording artist with the album "My Kind Of Country." She suggested to producer Harold Shedd that they avoid recording the album with a string section, and became adamant about it when informed that strings would cost an additional $10,000. Reba also started selecting her own material, and manager Bill Carter set up one of her first song-finding appointments with veteran songwriter Harlan Howard.

McEntire drove with then-husband Charlie Battles over to Howard's home, and after a half-hour of small talk, they sat down to listen to songs. Harlan played several "ditties" and Reba diplomatically passed on them. Satisfied that she wanted something better, Howard pulled out his ace.

He played her "Somebody Should Leave" and according to Harlan, Reba sat "bolt-upright in that chair like she'd been pinned by a Sumo wrestler." Tears came to her eyes and the hair stood up on her arms. When the song finished playing, Reba blinked away the tears and asked Harlan, "Can I have that song?" Harlan smiled and said, "I thought you'd like that one."

Reba believes Howard was testing her the whole time. She thinks that if she had liked the other ones, he wouldn't have played "Somebody Should Leave" for her. "This was his cherished baby and he was very protective of it," remembers Reba.

Harlan guarded "Somebody Should Leave" with good reason: it was personal. He started writing the song with Chick Rains on a 75-mile drive to Center Hill Lake and, as they discussed the status of his rocky marriage, Howard remarked, "It looks to me like somebody should leave." Rains looked over at him, instantly recognizing that the line would make a good song title, and they wrote the first verse and the chorus before they arrived at their destination, where Rains jotted it down on a legal pad.

After fishing on Harlan's houseboat until midnight, they finished the song on the sundeck the next morning. Howard decided that he wanted someone with a traditional bent – hopefully Reba – to record it. The lyrics about a married couple getting a divorce with the added complication of children in the proceedings would make for a very traditional-sounding country song, and Harlan believed there was none better to deliver such material than Reba McEntire. His instincts proved correct, and Reba logged the fourth of her 25 number one hits with "Somebody Should Leave" on May 11, 1985. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Candy Kisses"
(written by George Morgan)

George Morgan (#1, 1949)
Elton Britt (#4, 1949)
Red Foley (#4, 1949)
Cowboy Copus (#5, 1949)
Eddie Kirk (#9, 1949)
Bud Hobbs (#12, 1949)

I have a small, personal connection with Country Music Hall of Famer George Morgan. During the summer of 1973, to earn a few extra dollars, I worked as a stocker/sack boy at the Big Star Supermarket in the Nashville suburb of Madison, and George appeared there frequently to buy groceries. I would sack them and carry them out to his car (yes, sack boys used to actually carry groceries out to peoples' cars back in those days). Anyway, he knew I was a country music fan and we struck up conversations about his own career on the Grand Ole Opry and the music industry in general several times, and I enjoyed our visits very much. By the end of that summer, I temporarily left Nashville and headed back home to Missouri for awhile. Although I hadn't seen or spoken to Mr. Morgan for nearly two years, it was a sad day for me when word came that he had died of a heart ailment on July 7, 1975 at the age of only 51. Morgan's national career spanned over 25 years, from the late 1940s up to his death. George had many great records, but of course the one for which he is best-remembered is the legendary "Candy Kisses," his blockbuster chart debut in 1949. So with that, I present the backstory behind George Morgan's greatest achievement as both a writer and as a performer.

Morgan was born in Waverly, Tennessee in 1925. Like a host of other Southern families, the Morgans were caught up in hard times during the Depression. In order for his father to find work in a factory, George's family left the South for Ohio in the mid-1930s. As a teen, young Morgan wiled away many hours playing guitar and listening to music. Although many of his friends seemed to think that George was doing little more than wasting his time, the boy made money with his hobby long before any of his friends had even figured out what they were going to do after high school. While still in his mid-teens, his reputation as a singer had grown to such a point that WAKR, an Akron radio station, gave young Morgan his own show. After a successful run on WAKR, George left for a better-paying gig up the road in Wooster, Ohio.

What was to become one of the most important moments in Morgan's life grew out of a broken romance. On one particular day in the early 1940s, he felt like a heartsick teenager as he drove from his home in Barberton to his job in Wooster. A girlfriend had treated George badly for the umpteenth time. Angry, upset, and filled with all the wounds that were created by high school love, the young singer began to wonder just how much he really meant to the girl. George finally decided that she prized the candy kisses her mother gave her more than those that came from his lips. This realization did more than just frustrate him. It inspired him.

Arriving at the radio station early, Morgan sat down at a table and allowed a song to write itself. Within ten minutes, he not only had finished the lyrics, but fully polished the melody. With his guitar in hand, he premiered "Candy Kisses" live on the radio just moments after he had completed it. At the time, the

only real satisfaction he felt as he sang the song was that he had finally informed the selfish young lady just how he really felt about their relationship.

Even at an early age, George's velvet voice and smooth sound was far more pop than country. If not for a singer named Eddy Arnold, Morgan probably would have had to pursue a musical style outside country music. Because of the success that Arnold was having in both the country and pop fields, a major door would open up for Morgan not long after he graduated from high school. The WWVA Jamboree, a popular radio show out of Wheeling West Virginia (broadcast on a 50,000 watt station), called George and offered him a spot on their program. He accepted, packed his bags and moved to Wheeling. Once on the air, he introduced "Candy Kisses" to an audience that included listeners from most of the eastern portion of the nation. In short order, successful road dates and large bags of fan mail quickly made George one of the show's biggest attractions. So big that, even without a single hit record, he received an invitation to join Nashville's Grand Ole Opry in late 1948. Eddy Arnold had announced his departure from the show, and Opry officials wanted his replacement to possess a similar sound. Morgan fit the bill perfectly. Just as he had done in Wheeling, George quickly charmed the show's fans and as well as its management. He also caught the eye of talent scouts from Columbia Records. Within a few months, the label had Morgan under contract and in the studio. Their foremost goal was getting George's theme song on the market.

In late February 1949, "Candy Kisses" was shipped to radio stations and sales outlets from coast to coast. Columbia's leadership felt the record would do well, but (as in most cases of abnormally large hits), the label's executives had underestimated it. By the first part of April, Morgan had placed his first record at #1. He registered three weeks at the top, and kept "Candy Kisses" on Billboard's country chart for 23 weeks. It turned out to be his all-time biggest hit, and rapidly became one of country music's most-covered songs. In 1949 alone, there were five cover versions of "Candy Kisses," that's right, five (by Elton Britt, Red Foley, Cowboy Copus, Eddie Kirk and Bud Hobbs), and all made the Billboard Top Ten except one. Including George Morgan's original version, "Candy Kisses" spent a total of 65 weeks on the country charts. On the pop side, Eddy Howard and his Orchestra took note of Morgan's enormous country hit and soon released a big-band version of the song, notching a Top Twenty placement on the pop chart.

In country music's long and proud history, there have been a host of novelty or "gimmick" songs which have done well on the charts. A few rose above their own catchy titles to become special pieces of work. Some examples include 1948's "Humpty Dumpty Heart" by Hank Thompson, a couple of number ones from 1947: Merle Travis's "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed," and Tex Williams' "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)," and the 1979 Bellamy Brothers hit "If I Said You Have A Beautiful Body Would You Hold It Against Me." All of these were chart-busting smashes, but they had little going for them other than their gimmicks. Most other novelty numbers were forgotten almost as quickly as they had been written and produced. Yet, of all the songs which fit into this category, George Morgan's story of high school romance stands apart.

"Candy Kisses" became more than a gimmick because you didn't even have to know what candy kisses were to love the song. Simple, direct and filled with a message which almost anyone could relate to, more than sixty-five years after it first hit the charts and four decades after its singer's death, Morgan's classic is still one of country music's most familiar tunes. If he had lived long enough, George would have seen his record success surpassed by a member of his own family. His daughter Lorrie (who was just sixteen when her dad passed away in 1975) became a major recording star in her own right in the mid-1980s. When she was just four years into her RCA contract, she had already racked up more chart hits

than her father. Yet, even though most of Lorrie's fans aren't huge supporters of her dad's "crooning" style of music, they are aware of her strong ties to "Candy Kisses," and they rarely let her finish a show without performing it. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Georgia On My Mind"
(written by Hoagy Carmichael & Stuart Gorrell)

Frankie Trumbauer (#10 pop, 1931)
Ray Charles (#1 pop, 1960)
Willie Nelson (#1 country, #84 pop, 1978)

Though he couldn't buy a hit just a few years earlier, Willie Nelson commanded a juggernaut in the mid-1970s. The "Red Headed Stranger" album had succeeded against the accepted logic, and Willie's penchant for the unusual was widely embraced by the general public. His long hair, bandana and earring would hardly have been accepted from a more traditional figure, but Willie did things his own way, and that in itself engendered a certain amount of respect. The series of hits that he made with Waylon Jennings further enhanced that reputation, branding Nelson with an "outlaw" label.

As they had with "Red Headed Stranger," the executives at Columbia Records resisted Willie's 1978 concept: "Stardust," an album with ten of his all-time favorite songs, most of which were written before 1950. The label felt he should come up with new material, but Willie thought his idea was a perfect way to create an even larger audience. His younger fans would treat them like they were new songs, while older listeners would appreciate hearing some of their long-time favorites. Willie recorded the title track first, Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust." Then he added Carmichael's "Georgia On My Mind," written and recorded by Hoagy in 1930. Frankie Trumbauer covered the song the following year and sent it to a high position on the pop chart for the first time, reaching #10. Ray Charles gave "Georgia On My Mind" a new reading in 1960 and his record went all the way to #1. Nelson's 1978 version generated a revived interest in Carmichael, who also wrote other pop standards such as "Heart And Soul," "Ole Buttermilk Sky" and "I Get Along Without You Very Well," among others. A former law student, Hoagy died on December 27, 1981.

"Georgia On My Mind" yielded Willie's fifth number one single on June 10, 1978 and secured a Grammy award for him on March 15, 1979. Nelson's rendition had triggered renewed interest in the old classic, and shortly after his version became a big hit, a campaign was launched to get "Georgia On My Mind" designated as the official state song of Georgia (not by any particular artist, even though Georgia native Ray Charles performed his 1960 version live before the General Assembly of the Georgia State Legislature in order to persuade the lawmakers). In 1979, the song was so designated, and Hoagy Carmichael lived to see it. CBS-TV's "Designing Women" (set in Atlanta) even used "Georgia On My Mind" as its theme song.

Willie Nelson has since released three more standard-packed collections: "Somewhere Over The Rainbow," "Without A Song" and "What A Wonderful World." He explained his fascination with the pop

classics to USA Today's David Zimmerman. He said, "All of us songwriters try to compose songs of this same caliber, but it's difficult if not impossible to do. It's amazing how strong the lyrics and melodies are, and how many millions of people are affected by them." Nelson's "Stardust" album was a mainstay on the Billboard country album chart for an incredible 540 weeks (well over ten years)! It received a "quintuple platinum" certification from NARAS in 2002 (meaning sales of over five million units), and the album was recently inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame's "Class of 2015." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Together Again"
(written by Buck Owens)

Buck Owens (#1, 1964)
Ray Charles (#19 pop, 1966)
Emmylou Harris (#1, 1976)
Kenny Rogers & Dottie West (#19, 1984)

1963 was the watershed year for Buck Owens. He had notched the first of his 21 number one hits in late spring with "Act Naturally," then followed it up in early fall with what would turn out to be his biggest record (and the thirteenth biggest country single of all-time) "Love's Gonna Live Here," which spent sixteen weeks at the summit of Billboard's country chart. The leader of the Bakersfield music scene was a thirty-four year old sensation whose California honky-tonk sound had seemingly come out of nowhere to control a good portion of Nashville's chart action.

In spite of being hung with a West Coast label, Owens was a Texas-born product who had migrated with his family to Arizona during the Depression. A high school dropout, Buck held a number of menial jobs in his late teens before taking his musical talent west. By the time he reached twenty-one he had not only become a solid guitar player, but had a steady job with a nightclub band. By the mid-1950s he had worked his way into the Capitol Records studios in Los Angeles as a session player, backing such artists as Tennessee Ernie Ford, Sonny James, Wanda Jackson and Faron Young. During his days of session work, Buck often tried to convince the A & R men on Capitol's staff that he had what it took to sell records. He was rejected time and time again. This pattern was broken only when one of the producers told him, "Owens, we've got plenty of singers, what we need are songs."

While Buck continued to work sessions and play clubs, he now also began to write songs too. By 1956 his compositions had caught the eye of Capitol Records' head man Ken Nelson, who reviewed all of Owens' newly-written material. His opinion of it was favorable, and the following year Nelson signed Buck to a recording contract. Two years later, in October 1959, Buck Owens entered the Top Five for the first time with "Under Your Spell Again."

One of the main attributes that had sold Ken Nelson on Buck was that he had a style all his own. Raised on Texas swing and cowboy music, Owens had also taken to rockabilly when that craze controlled the country charts. To these three diverse musical styles, the singer added a western honky-tonk vocal sound that was more melodic than Webb Pierce and not as harsh as Lefty Frizzell. While all of these areas of influence could be heard in his work, none seemed to dominate. It was an even mix that was

unique to Buck. The style later became known as the “Bakersfield Sound,” and was the foundation for the music of Merle Haggard and Dwight Yoakam.

As a songwriter, Owens knew his own singing strengths and weaknesses better than anybody. His compositions thus were written with just one voice in mind. Therefore, only a few of his hits would be redone by other artists. Typical of his work was “My Heart Skips A Beat.” With a constant joyful drumbeat setting the rhythm and Don Rich’s high tenor harmonies, the song literally jumped off the radio. In this song as well as other number ones such as “Love’s Gonna Live Here,” “I’ve Got A Tiger By The Tail,” “I Don’t Care (Just As Long As You Love Me),” “Sam’s Place” and many others, it sounds as if Buck is grinning his way through each and every word. He didn’t seem to be feeling the songs’ messages as much as he was enjoying making a ton of money from those records.

One of his self-penned tunes that seemed to reveal a much deeper Buck Owens was “Together Again.” Shortly after composing this song, Buck immediately dismissed it as a “throwaway” piece. He had written the number in just a few minutes and perhaps because it had taken so little effort, Owens couldn’t see the song’s real merits. “Together Again” spoke of the joy of reclaimed love in an almost prayerful manner. Its simple message was wrapped in a melody that seemed almost better-suited for a song about heartbreak, not love rekindled. With its mournful music set against a happy message, it reminded the listener of just how much it hurts to lose someone you love. Yet it also spelled out that this deep anguish is what makes getting back together again so wonderful.

Buck threw “Together Again” on the “B” side of the high-energy number “My Heart Skips A Beat.” Nothing was expected of the ballad. Yet, just a week after the “A” side landed on Billboard’s country singles chart on March 28, 1964, “Together Again” followed. It spotlighted Tom Brumley on one of the industry’s most highly-acclaimed steel guitar solos. “My Heart Skips A Beat” reached #1 in May and logged a three-week stay at the summit. Then, in an unprecedented event, “Together Again” knocked “My Heart Skips A Beat” out of the top spot on June 6th, marking the only time in country music history that the “B” side of a record replaced the “A” side at number one. After two weeks at the top, “Together Again” fell and “My Heart Skips A Beat” returned to #1 for four more weeks, marking a non-consecutive total of seven.

“Together Again,” the ballad that Buck Owens had tossed aside as a loser, was now one of his biggest hits. Yet, the man with the happy face and sly grin never seemed comfortable singing “Together Again” on stage. It always looked as though he was a bit uneasy having to stand still and sing so seriously about love. He “retired” the song from his concert performances shortly after the frenzy about it had diminished following its initial chart run, although Ray Charles recorded “Together Again” on the pop side a couple of years later and went into the Top Twenty with it.

In 1976, a one-time opening act for rocker Gram Parsons was looking for a song that would propel her to the top of the country charts. Emmylou Harris had based her operations out of California and recorded for a West Coast label, but she really felt more at home in Music City. She possessed one of the purest voices in music, but because of her rock background and West Coast ties, Harris was considered an outsider in Nashville. She understood the industry’s fear, but it was actually her rock mentor’s advice that led her to pursue a change in her musical direction to country. Before he died in 1973, Gram Parsons pointed out to Emmylou that in rock, the music’s message was often secondary, while in country it was almost always the primary ingredient of a song.

From her study of country music, Harris had come to treasure the way that "Together Again" told a love story without coming off as corny or superficial. She felt that her strong voice would be able to take a song like this and add a layer of rich fabric to the message. While Buck Owens had made the song a hit, Emmylou sensed that there was still a lot left to exploit and expose in the number. In the recording studio, Harris took the song and painted a magnificent picture from those wonderful words and that soaring tune with her rich country phrasing. The Reprise label (established by Frank Sinatra) released Emmylou's version of "Together Again" in early 1976 and it traveled up the chart throughout late winter and early spring, landing at #1 in April. It was Harris's first chart-topper and would lay the foundation for a career that produced twenty-six Top Ten hits including seven number ones.

Emmylou felt as if "Together Again" had been written especially for her, and Buck Owens came to believe it himself after hearing Harris's version. He absolutely loved her record, and it was at this point that Buck finally realized the real power of his composition. The writer was so moved by Emmylou's rendition that he re-activated "Together Again" in his concert performances. Three years later, Owens and Harris released a lyrically-updated duet of a tribute to the song called "Play Together Again, Again" which reached #11. In 1979, a duet version of "Together Again" by Kenny Rogers & Dottie West was originally recorded for their "Classics" album, but ended up coming out on Kenny's "Duets" album five years later. The Rogers/West single of "Together Again" peaked at #19 in the spring of '84. Recently, Vince Gill released his own version of the song (featuring steel guitarist Paul Franklin) on his much-acclaimed 2013 album "Bakersfield."

Buck Owens' impact on the country music world has often been overlooked through the years. Although notching twenty-one chart-topping hits and holding the #1 position for eighty-two weeks, ranking him as one of country's ten most-successful recording artists, his influence is sometimes dismissed without much thought or consideration. This might be contributed to his "happy-go-lucky" demeanor on the "Hee Haw" television series, but as an artist and songwriter Owens stands tall. He not only forged a new, wildly successful sound, but was also responsible for bringing country music to a legion of new converts. Buck's honest approach and easy smile won him millions of fans. Yet, his most lasting and impressive work may have been one whose potential not even he could foresee. "Together Again" became an indelible classic despite Owens' initial opinion of it, and the song will always be around to remind us of the man's genius. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"I Will Always Love You"
(written by Dolly Parton)

Dolly Parton (#1, 1974)
Dolly Parton (#1 country, #50 pop, 1982)
Whitney Houston (#1 pop, 1992)
Dolly Parton & Vince Gill (#15, 1995)

Songwriter Jan Crutchfield (whose most famous hit was Jack Greene's "Statue Of A Fool") once famously said that "Songwriters are born, not made, and if anyone was ever born a songwriter, it was Dolly Parton." Born in the backwoods near Sevierville, Tennessee in 1946, Dolly was composing songs before

she could read or write. At that time, Dolly's mother would listen to each new rendering and transcribe the toddler's simple compositions onto old scraps of paper. When she was ten, the blue-eyed blonde was playing her tunes on an old Martin guitar. By the time she finished high school she was drawing attention far and wide for her musical abilities.

The day after her graduation from high school in 1964, Parton left the Smoky Mountains and hopped a bus to Nashville, fully expecting to make it big in the music industry. Already shrewd and seasoned, Dolly was able to wrangle auditions and then proceeded to amaze the record executives with her mountain soprano and her self-penned songs. Within a couple of months, Dolly had a record deal and was already getting a songwriter's draw from a publisher. However, Fred Foster and Monument Records were having a difficult time figuring out just what direction to take with Dolly. Nashville was accustomed to women with strong, throaty voices, but Dolly sang more like a child. For a couple of years the company attempted to get Parton to develop a new style, but nothing they tried seemed to work. Finally, Monument released "Dumb Blonde" in 1967. It and a follow-up, "Something Fishy" made very little headway on the charts, and the label reasoned that Dolly just didn't have what it took to become a force in country music. Monument dropped her and Parton suddenly became a former recording artist with no prospects. She was even unable to interest other performers to cut her songs, which also dried up her publishing income.

Dolly's big break came because of a marriage. Not hers but Norma Jean Beasler's. Norma Jean was the featured female vocalist on Porter Wagoner's highly-successful syndicated television show. She had decided to get married, quit the music business and move to Oklahoma. Wagoner had heard some of Dolly's compositions, liked her style, and thought she might be a good replacement for Norma Jean. He hired Parton and also brokered a record deal for her at his own label, RCA. For the next seven years Porter and Dolly would be a mainstay on both television and the tour circuit. With Wagoner's guidance and the exposure she received on his TV program, Parton began to generate interest. As Porter had realized, once audiences saw her and heard her performances, they would be drawn in by her talent. Porter and Dolly began notching top ten duets in the late '60s, and by July of 1970, Dolly logged her first bona fide solo hit for RCA, ironically not one of her own compositions but a forty year old Jimmie Rodgers song: "Mule Skinner Blues (Blue Yodel #8)." By early '71 however she began to have hits with her own material, with "Joshua" being her first chart-topper. By '74 Dolly had become a top star and was beginning to feel stifled with her business relationship with Porter. She wanted to move higher up success's ladder, much further than her association with Wagoner could take her. Dolly figured that she was ready to reach out to a broader listenership, but Porter didn't want to tamper with a formula that was working.

Dolly once told Billboard Magazine that songwriting kept her sane through the rough times with Porter. As she was trying to find a way to cut herself loose from the Wagoner entourage, she often thought that she was literally going crazy. This would not be an easy parting and Porter wasn't going to let her go without a fight. The anguish and pain that was going to result from this split would prove to be worse than most divorces. The wounds inflicted in the legal battle would take decades to heal, and the scars would be evident long after the two performers had publicly made up.

Parton began to write remarkably sad songs. The war that was raging between her and her mentor had caused her to review her entire life. For weeks, Dolly dredged up every one of her life's tragic episodes. She thought about the funerals of loved ones, illnesses and even broken high school romances. With these memories constantly bombarding her, she penned a plaintive love ballad entitled "I Will Always Love You." Dolly took the song to her producer at RCA, Bob Ferguson, who agreed it was the best thing

she had ever written. In an almost magical way, Parton had spun the fragile lyrics around a very simple lead line. Her voice, falling and then soaring, brought all the necessary emotions to the monumental work. Direct, straightforward and honest, “I Will Always Love You” was filled with hidden messages about the complexities of Dolly’s current situation. As she left Porter, Dolly hoped that he would realize just how much she knew she owed him. In a way, this song was a thank you for the break Wagoner had given her. It was also her goodbye.

During its fifteen week chart ride “I Will Always Love You” checked in at the summit of Billboard’s Hot Country Singles chart for one week on June 8, 1974. Other Parton singles had been bigger hits, but there was something about this song that registered with both the singer and her fans. “I Will Always Love You” seemed to reveal a Dolly without all the show business trappings. Folks inside and outside the industry were always wondering who Dolly really was, and many thought they had captured the elusive real person in this ballad. So strong was the song’s message that Dolly would use it as a closer for her concerts as well as for her own short-lived network television show.

“I Will Always Love You” would have remained Dolly’s most-requested number even without the 1982 remake and single issue. That idea developed during the filming of a truly awful excuse for a movie called “The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas” starring Dolly and Burt Reynolds, then one of the nation’s most popular actors. It was decided that the film needed an additional song for Dolly’s character, Mona, to sing to the character played by Reynolds, the local sheriff. With the hectic schedule and frantic pace of filming, Parton had no time to write anything new, so she reached into her trunk of oldies and pulled out “I Will Always Love You.” Everyone agreed that the song worked perfectly in the scene.

Even though the movie was one of the year’s biggest flops, Dolly’s second version of “I Will Always Love You” again covered familiar ground on Billboard’s country charts, sailing to #1 on October 16, 1982. The remake also spent a few weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart, reaching #50. When the two records are taken together, it’s Parton’s most successful song of her career. By becoming the first single to ever top the charts at two different times by the same artist, “I Will Always Love You” had already made history. Yet Dolly remained unfazed. She had an agenda. Parton didn't want to be known as just the most successful act in country music, she aspired to be recognized as one of the world’s biggest stars. So Dolly didn’t spend much time following the country charts, instead she had her eye on movies, television specials and spectacular live shows. With smart planning and superb marketing, she fulfilled most of her ambitions over the next decade.

By the late eighties and early nineties, new artists had displaced most of Music City’s established stars, and Dolly Parton was one of the few “old timers” who could still get play on country radio. Former superstars and hit makers like Barbara Mandrell, Loretta Lynn and Tammy Wynette couldn’t drum up much interest from labels or disc jockeys. But Dolly still made noise. This power came because she had become bigger than country music. Dolly’s image was known by hundreds of millions around the world. Yet it was an old song that soon proved that her songwriting talents exceeded even Dolly’s own massive stardom.

In 1992, pop and soul music’s dynamic Whitney Houston needed a number to become the theme for her motion picture debut in “The Bodyguard.” What the singer wanted was something that would properly display one of the world’s most magnificent voices. With some of music’s best composers vying for this shot, Houston rejected the hot new choices and picked Dolly’s “I Will Always Love You.” Thanks in part to the hit status of the movie, but more to the marriage of composition, talent and arrangement, Whitney placed the song on top of all the major charts except country. This new version of “I Will Always

Love You" reigned for so long it even passed Elvis Presley's "Don't Be Cruel"/"Hound Dog" as the most popular single in the history of modern music.

Many thought that when Whitney reached the summit with the Parton oldie that the song would never again be cut, but Dolly had other ideas. While she spoke fondly of Houston's treatment of her self-penned hit, the country singer/songwriter still considered "I Will Always Love You" as her own theme song, and she wanted to make sure that the world associated it more strongly with her than Whitney. So in the summer of 1995 Dolly headed back into the studio to record yet another new version of what had now become a country and pop standard. This time she invited Vince Gill to join her, and for the first time the song was cut as a duet.

On August 26, 1995, Dolly returned to the stage of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry for the first time in five years. Her old mentor, Porter Wagoner, introduced her to a full crowd and a national television audience. Dolly sang her 1973 number one hit "Jolene" and then brought out Vince Gill. She knew that she had the audience on the edge of their seats and let them sweat for a few minutes while she talked about her new album. Then she and Vince sang "I Will Always Love You." Their duet version sent the song into the upper rungs of the chart for the fourth time in twenty one years. The audience rose to its feet, demanding that Dolly and Vince come back and do it again. She agreed, but this time, Dolly asked Porter to join in. The three legendary stars did the encore of "I Will Always Love You," and the feud between Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton had officially come to an end. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Way Down"
(written by Layng Martine, Jr., Fats Washington & Don Robey)

Elvis Presley (#1 Country, #18 Pop, #14 Adult Contemporary, 1977)

By 1977, the music and film star who had thrilled women as Elvis Presley had deteriorated into an overweight reminder of an earlier era. His concerts still consistently sold out, and The King gave plenty of shows until June 26, 1977. That night, he performed at Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, Indiana, but it proved to be the last performance of his legendary career. Presley's closing number at the final concert was his 1961 classic, "Can't Help Falling In Love."

One day earlier, a new song by Elvis called "Way Down" debuted on Billboard's country singles chart. Recorded in the living room at Graceland Mansion on October 29, 1976, it concluded with an ungodly low note coaxed from J. D. Sumner, the bass singer of the Stamps Quartet. He hit a double low "C" (three octaves below middle "C"), which the Guinness Book of World Records cites as the lowest recorded note ever produced by the human voice. Sumner had first accomplished this feat on a 1966 recording of the hymn "Blessed Assurance."

In late July of '77, several of Elvis's former bodyguards released a book called "Elvis: What Happened?" accusing The King of a drug addiction, among other things. Presley was hurt by the book, but he continued to enjoy success with his latest single, "Way Down." On August 16, 1977, he played racquetball with several associates, including girlfriend Ginger Alden, but at 2:30 that afternoon, she

found Elvis's lifeless body on the floor of the bathroom, adjacent to his bedroom at Graceland Mansion. Resuscitation efforts proved futile.

Presley's death at age 42 came as a shock to an adoring public, and thousands flocked to Memphis overnight to pay homage to their deceased hero. More than 25,000 people viewed his body, standing in line for hours through first, a light rain, and later the grueling heat of summer. At approximately 4:00 A. M. on August 19th, two women were killed when a car plowed into the crowd gathered outside the mansion's gates.

Four days after Presley's death, "Way Down" reached the #1 position on the August 20, 1977 edition of Billboard's country singles chart. The song had initially peaked at only #31 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart dated August 6, 1977, and had fallen to #53 for the week ending August 27th, but thereafter it reversed direction and reached an even higher peak of #18 on September 24th. A few weeks later, "Way Down" topped the United Kingdom's singles chart, the only Elvis record to do so since 1970's "The Wonder Of You."

Presley left an incredible legacy. Included were 33 movie appearances, dozens of classic recordings and many unanswered questions. His "Aloha From Hawaii Via Satellite" concert set a record when it achieved a worldwide audience estimated at one billion viewers. Billboard Magazine officially proclaimed Elvis Presley the first recording artist to sell one billion records worldwide.

Upon his death, record stores immediately sold out all of their existing Presley stock, and RCA kept its Indianapolis plant open 24 hours a day, pressing only material by The King to meet the demand. Meanwhile, producer Felton Jarvis was already at work enhancing material recorded during Presley's final concert tour for release as a two-record set, "Elvis In Concert." Beginning September 3rd, Presley occupied the top spot on Billboard's country album chart for fifteen consecutive weeks. The "Moody Blue" album held the position for the first ten weeks, followed by the live LP. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"When You're Hot, You're Hot"
(written by J. R. Hubbard)

Jerry Reed (#1 country, #9 pop, 1971)

On April 18, 1970, RCA Records placed an ad in Billboard Magazine in which Chet Atkins, vice president of the label's country division, basically put his job on the line. Atkins called Jerry Reed "one of the greatest undeveloped talents I have ever known," at a time when Reed had yet to crack the Top Ten. "If Jerry doesn't make it big in the near future," Chet continued, "I will probably quit my job, because if that is true, I do not know talent." Atkins probably had a sense of what was about to happen. By the end of the year, Reed was one of the hottest-selling acts in the business.

The record that turned things around was "Amos Moses," which debuted on October 24, 1970. Prior to that, Reed's highest chart position as a performer had been his #11 peak with "Are You From Dixie (Cause I'm From Dixie Too)," although Jerry had already enjoyed the success of scoring a #1 hit as the

composer of Porter Wagoner's 1962 chart-topper "Misery Loves Company." Actually, "Amos Moses" topped out at only #16 on Billboard's country playlist, but it fared much better on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart, peaking at #8 on February 27, 1971. The single was also certified for sales of one million copies.

Reed's follow-up was even bigger. Jerry was a regular on television's "The Glen Campbell Goodtime Hour," and during the course of a show, he forgot one of his lines. Stuck, he simply ad-libbed "When you're hot, you're hot," and the audience went crazy. Reed was quick to recognize that he was on to something, and wrote an entire song based on that line when he got home. He incorporated the phrase into a crap game, and the song's storyline concluded with an appearance in court. Between the sassy female background vocalists, Reed's sloppy rap and the grinding guitar work, "When You're Hot, You're Hot" took on a bit of a party atmosphere. Jerry liked to have fun, and he believed that when people listen to music, their goal is to have fun and be entertained. So he intentionally kept political points of view out of all the songs he wrote and performed, keeping the proceedings lively and fun. His approach paid off quite handsomely. "When You're Hot, You're Hot" spent five weeks at the top of Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart, and peaked at #9 on the pop listings, a tremendous showing for a country release. It also brought Jerry Reed Hubbard a Grammy for "Best Country Vocal Performance by a Male," and symbolically saved Chet Atkins' job. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Rollin' With The Flow"
(written by Jerry Hayes)

Charlie Rich (#1 country, #32 adult contemporary, #101 pop, 1977)
Mark Chesnutt (#25, 2008)

After "I Love My Friend" reached #1 on October of 1974, it took nearly three years for Charlie Rich to return to the top of Billboard's country singles chart with new material ("She Called Me Baby," a ten-year old cut from his RCA days had reached number one in December of '74). The "Silver Fox's" career had been significantly damaged due to his infamous on-air meltdown at the 1975 CMA telecast, although he still managed to score some successful chart placements during the balance of the '70s, including a great cover of the '67 David Houston/Tammy Wynette duet "My Elusive Dreams" (#3), "Every Time You Touch Me (I Get High)" (#3), "All Over Me" (#4) and his version of Lenny Welch's old '63 pop hit, "Since I Fell For You" (#10).

Rich's return to number one came when producer Billy Sherrill uncovered "Rollin' With The Flow," which originally had appeared as the "B" side of T. G. Sheppard's first #1 hit "Devil In The Bottle," released in late '74. Sherrill earmarked "Rollin' With The Flow" immediately for Charlie, but he had a major problem with one word in Sheppard's version. Billy thought it was a key word, even believing that if it wasn't substituted, the song could be adversely affected as a potential hit-maker. Sherrill's instincts were usually spot-on, so he changed the word. As originally written, a line says, "I've got a lot of crazy friends, and One forgives me of my sins," meaning Jesus, Billy thought. Wanting to stay away from the religious connotations and go for a big secular record, Billy changed it to "they forgive me of my sins." Although not bothered by the original line, Charlie said, "I like that better."

It wasn't that Sherrill was "anti-religious music" (after all, he had produced Tammy Wynette's acclaimed 1968 album "Inspiration," Charlie Walker's terrific album "He Is My Everything" also from '68, to name just a couple of the gospel collections he helmed), but Billy just didn't believe the religious reference in "Rollin' With The Flow" was appropriate. The song still mentions "Jesus Loves Me," but that religious aside was hardly upsetting. After its debut on Billboard's country singles chart over the 1977 Memorial Day weekend, the record brought Charlie Rich back to the #1 plateau on August 6th, marking his eighth (and next-to-last) chart-topper. It peaked at #32 on the adult contemporary playlist and just missed the Billboard Hot 100 by one position, reaching the top of the "Bubbling Under" chart.

The following year, Rich signed with United Artists Records for a reported $750,000. Larry Butler produced an immediate Top Ten on Charlie with "Puttin' In Overtime At Home," and three more remaining singles on Epic were released: "Beautiful Woman" (#10), the self-penned "On My Knees," a duet with Janie Fricke (Rich's final #1 record), and his update of Al Martino's old '66 pop hit "Spanish Eyes (#20). In the early 1980s, Charlie went into semi-retirement in Memphis, where he built a recording studio behind his house. Financially, he was fully capable of taking the time off. Although an investment in the Memphis franchise of the short-lived World Football League fared poorly, he had made several shrewd business moves, acquiring interests in a bank and in the Wendy's hamburger chain.

On July 24, 1995, Charlie Rich was travelling to Florida by car with his wife when he experienced a bout of severe coughing. After visiting a doctor in St. Francisville, Louisiana and receiving antibiotics, he continued travelling until stopping to rest for the night. Later that night he died in his sleep in a Hammond, Louisiana motel at the age of only 62. The cause of death was a pulmonary embolism. Rich is buried in the Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Harper Valley P. T. A."
(written by Tom T. Hall)

Jeannie C. Riley (#1 country, #1 pop, 1968)

Two summers after Jeannie C. Riley moved from Anson, Texas to Nashville with her husband, two kids and a U-Haul trailer in tow, she became a prime example of the old adage about being in the right place at the right time. Riley performed on demos for several companies in Music City. Although her office skills were hardly top notch, Jeannie's interest in the music business was so keen that songwriter Jerry Chestnut gave her a secretarial job anyway.

One of her demos crossed the desk of producer Shelby Singleton, who had recently established a new, independent label called Plantation Records. Singleton decided that her voice would be perfect for a song he had picked up from Tom T. Hall six months earlier called "Harper Valley P. T. A.." The tune was about a sassy woman who lived in Hall's hometown of Morehead, Kentucky, and he had depicted her battle with the local P. T. A. after her daughter had been spanked in school. Hall always claimed that most of the song's lyrics were true, with the exception of the central character wearing a miniskirt. The story's events had taken place in the early 1950s, long before the miniskirt came into fashion during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. With the song's lyrical update to reflect the current fashion trend,

Jeannie felt somewhat insecure about it. She knew that "Harper Valley P. T. A." would score well on the pop charts, but she had doubts about its country potential.

Singleton hastily drew up a contract on a Thursday evening. Jeannie quickly signed it and was in the studio the next morning ready to record the song. The second take was chosen and within hours, an advance pressing was sent over to Nashville's WSM-AM and Ralph Emery was playing it on the air. Riley says she had an instinctive feeling that "Harper Valley P. T. A." was going to be a monster even before she left the studio. Jeannie went home and telephoned her mother in Texas, telling her that she had just cut the nation's next number one single. In fact, just two months after her July 26th session, the record topped Billboard's country chart, one week after it reached #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart.

"Harper Valley P. T. A." sold 1.6 million copies in its first ten days of release, and has sold well over eight million to date. The record is one of only four to reach the summit of both the Billboard country and pop charts during the entire decade of the 1960s (the other three are Marty Robbins' "El Paso" in January of 1960, Jimmy Dean's "Big Bad John" in November of 1961 and Bobby Goldsboro's "Honey" in May, 1968).

Riley won 1968's Grammy award for "Best Female Country Vocal Performance," and the Country Music Association awarded "Harper Valley P. T. A." the trophy for 1968's Single of the Year. It's understandably almost impossible for an artist to surpass or even come close to matching a release of such enormity, and Jeannie C. Riley didn't. She managed only five more Top Ten hits, none reaching any higher than #4, and all of them are forgotten today. By 1972, her music career was over. She became a born-again Christian and wrote about her rollercoaster musical experience in her autobiography "From Harper Valley To The Mountain Top." "Harper Valley P. T. A." went on to become the basis for a movie and a hit television series, with Barbara Eden starring in both. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Don't Touch Me"
(written by Hank Cochran)

Jeannie Seely (#2 country, #85 pop, 1966)
Wilma Burgess (#12, 1966)

By 1966, one of Nashville's top composers was still trying to make a splash as a singer and recording artist, but Hank Cochran had managed to place only three releases in the Top-Thirty over the past four years. He was giving it everything he had, working a lot of shows, although in the end Hank's legacy would be the songs he wrote for other artists. Nonetheless, Cochran found himself performing a week-long gig at a club in Minnesota in 1966 where he started composing a new song called "Don't Touch Me." Between shows, Hank continued to work on the number, but he just couldn't seem to get to a point where he was satisfied with it. When the week at the club was over, Cochran hopped a plane and headed for Rochester, New York. Hank was dating a twenty-five year old singer named Jeannie Seely, who was performing in Porter Wagoner's touring show just after Norma Jean's departure from the Wagoner entourage (Dolly Parton was eventually hired as Norma Jean's permanent replacement). Wagoner, Seely and the band were in Rochester for a performance and Cochran flew there simply to spend some time with Jeannie during his schedule break. Seely had already obtained a recording

contract with Fred Foster's Monument Records and was looking for a good song to use as her first single.

As she was now dating Hank Cochran, one of Music City's best-known tunesmiths, it seemed that with just one innovative idea, Jeannie might have her song. And so it was. Upon seeing her when he arrived in Rochester, the feelings which first inspired Cochran to start writing "Don't Touch Me" in Minnesota came flooding back to his mind, and he felt an urgent need to finish it because of the song's message. Hank was falling for Seely but he had some reservations about getting seriously involved. He was coming off a divorce and didn't want to ever go through anything that painful again. In a sense, the very words Cochran had written explained this fear so eloquently that he might have been afraid to expose his heart to Jeannie and to the world.

While Wagoner, Seely and the rest of the group were on stage performing, Cochran completed "Don't Touch Me," but became inebriated in the process. After the show, Hank tried to explain his condition to Porter and Jeannie, while at the same time attempting to tell them about his new song. They wanted to hear it right then, but Hank was wasted and couldn't sing or even play the guitar. The next day, though, Cochran did sing it for them and they both agreed that it would be a big hit for Jeannie. She immediately telephoned Fred Foster in Nashville, explaining that she had found the right song and asked him to set things up for a session once she got back to town.

Meanwhile, a sober and happy Hank Cochran made a trip to Chicago to appear on a local television show. Also on the program happened to be country music mega-star Buck Owens. Although Buck hadn't recorded any of Cochran's songs, he was very familiar with the writer and his work. During a break, Hank played "Don't Touch Me," for Owens and Buck immediately wanted it. Cochran told him that he couldn't have it because he'd already given it to Jeannie Seely. "Who the heck is Jeannie Seely?" Owens wanted to know. "I've never heard of her." The writer laughed and then slyly told Buck, "You will as soon as this song comes out."

Monument pulled Jeannie into the studio when she returned to Nashville. Producer Fred Foster put together a solid recording of Hank's new song, then quickly pressed and shipped the record. Released in March, Jeannie Seely's "Don't Touch Me" was on the charts by mid-April. It was almost unheard of for a new act to get that kind of early chart action. Owen Bradley at Decca noted those early numbers with great interest. Bradley immediately knew it was the song's quality more than anything else that was propelling the new artist. The producer had always liked Cochran's work, and thought "Don't Touch Me" was one of the best things he had written. Owen quickly hatched a plan and met with one of the newest female singers in his Decca stable, Wilma Burgess. Wilma had just put her song "Baby" into the top ten, and needed a follow-up. Bradley and Burgess decided to immediately cover Seely's record and make a rush-shipping in order to try to beat Jeannie's single up the playlist.

With Wilma Burgess's cover of "Don't Touch Me," Cochran was concerned for Jeannie. Decca was a much bigger and much more influential label than Monument, and could easily beat the smaller label in distribution. Using his own money, Hank hired a couple of promotion men to start plugging the Seely version in the big markets. This worked in some places, but surprisingly not in Chicago. John Trotter at 50,000 watt powerhouse WJJD stayed hot on the Wilma Burgess release and completely ignored Jeannie's. Decca had a stronger foothold in many of the major markets, leaving the two versions to fight it out in the smaller cities. By late summer the war was over but amazingly, Seely had won. The powerful Decca promotions machine had come up short. Burgess managed to climb to #12 and then tailed off. Jeannie had climbed all the way to #2, holding that position for three straight weeks, but wasn't quite

able to reach the summit because of the few big stations like WJJD that remained loyal to Decca's version.

Hank Cochran always believed (and rightfully so) that having the two versions of "Don't Touch Me" going head to head at the same time kept Seely from notching a #1 record on Billboard's country singles chart. Even years later when he discussed this, his voice still revealed a slight bitterness. Jeannie's version did reach #1 on the other two national charts at the time (Cashbox and Record World, both now gone). In addition, Cochran picked up a couple of BMI awards for the song, and Seely won the 1966 Grammy award for "Best Female Country Vocal Performance." The record also briefly put Jeannie's name on the Billboard "Hot 100" pop chart for the first and only time, topping out at #85.

Over the years, "Don't Touch Me" has been recorded more times than even writer Cochran can remember, and has become one of the country music industry's most-performed songs. In an interesting footnote, even though the Seely and Burgess versions were battling it out for chart superiority, Jeannie's record would have made it to #1 in Billboard anyway except for one small thing: When she was sitting at #2 and about to make her move up to the top spot, Buck Owens' "Think Of Me" jumped over Seely and kept her locked in second. On the day that particular chart came out, Owens phoned Cochran reminding Hank that if he had let him have "Don't Touch Me," Cochran's song would have gone to #1. Hank told Buck that he was still glad he gave it to Jeannie. The record served as a good launch for Seely's recording career, which lasted for twelve years. Additionally, Hank and Seely were married soon after "Don't Touch Me" ended its chart run, and Cochran wrote most of her subsequent hits, including her two biggest follow-ups, "Wish I Didn't Have To Miss You," a duet with Jack Greene which topped out at #2 in 1969, and "Can I Sleep In Your Arms," which finished at #6 in 1973. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Life Turned Her That Way"
(written by Harlan Howard)

Mel Tillis (#11, 1967)
Ricky Van Shelton (#1, 1988)

As a teenager, Ricky Van Shelton preferred rock music over country. At least, he tried to make it seem that way in order to fit in better with his schoolmates. Most of us did that, to one degree or another. But when Shelton attended a community event in his hometown of Gretna, Virginia with his brother Ronnie, his taste regarding music was completely transformed. He witnessed over twenty people, young and old alike, participating in a country music "jam session," and from that point on, Ricky was totally hooked on country music. He set out to forge a career for himself in the music business, moving to Nashville and making the rounds in the nightclub circuit.

Meanwhile, Shelton's wife Bettye was working at her own job and became friends with one of her co-workers, Linda Thompson, the wife of a prominent Nashville newspaper reporter named Jerry Thompson. One day Linda was visiting Bettye at the Sheltons' house and overheard Ricky singing. She captured some of it on a cassette tape and took it home. Linda told her husband that this guy is really good and that he might be able to offer him some assistance, but initially Jerry refused to listen to the

tape. He told Linda that he didn't want to involve himself at all with the country music industry. So instead of pressuring Jerry, his wife simply started playing Ricky's tape around the house for her own enjoyment. However, when she got the opportunity, she played it within earshot of her husband. Jerry overheard it and was impressed. He suggested that Linda invite the Sheltons over for a cookout. Ricky brought along his guitar and the two couples spent a wonderful evening together becoming very good friends. That night, Ricky sang a few songs live and Thompson was even more impressed with his talent. The next day Jerry took Ricky over to the Columbia offices to meet CBS Records president Rick Blackburn. The executive signed Shelton to a long-term recording contract, teaming him with staff producer Steve Buckingham.

While looking over material in preparation for Shelton's first album, Buckingham played him a song called "Life Turned Her That Way," which Ricky immediately warmed up to, not realizing that the tune had been around for over twenty years, and was associated with a couple of very well-known artists. Its composer was referred to as 'the dean of country songwriters."

In the late 1950s, Harlan Howard was based in the Los Angeles area, where he worked at several manual labor jobs while writing songs and hawking his finished material. Finally, Howard managed to get one of his tunes into the hands of Columbia Records A & R man Don Law. The song was "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down," and Law thought it might be a breakthrough hit for one of the newer artists he was producing at the time, Charlie Walker, a San Antonio, Texas deejay and emcee, who was trying to get his career going as a singer. Law was right, and "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down" proved to be a major country hit for Walker, peaking at #2 on Billboard's country chart in 1958. Howard's next tune "Heartaches By The Number" was an even bigger hit, first for Ray Price on the country chart, then for Guy Mitchell on Billboard's pop chart, where the song soared all the way to #1.

With the success of these two songs, Harlan Howard decided it was time for a move to Nashville. By 1960, his sensational catalog of songs provided huge hits for literally every recording artist in town. During one particular week in 1961, fifteen of Harlan's songs were listed on Billboard's country chart at the same time! This stunning accomplishment simply blows the mind, an achievement that has never even come close to being equaled, in any field of music. In all, over 100 of his compositions reached country's Top Ten listings over a 30 year period. Howard's name even appeared on Billboard's "rhythm and blues" chart a couple of times, as he wrote Ray Charles' 1963 hit "Busted," (covered by Johnny Cash, and later by John Conlee), and Joe Simon's 1969 chart-topping R&B hit "The Chokin' Kind" (originally recorded by Waylon Jennings in 1967, reaching #8).

When Howard wrote "Life Turned Her That Way" in 1965, he gave the song to "Little" Jimmy Dickens, best known for his novelty records like "Take An Old Cold Tater (And Wait)," "A Sleepin' At The Foot Of The Bed," and the #1 smash "May The Bird Of Paradise Fly Up Your Nose," Dickens' only country chart-topper, and a #15 pop hit as well. Even though Harlan liked Dickens' work on his occasional ballads, he correctly predicted that Jimmy's version of "Life Turned Her That Way" would not be a hit. However, Mel Tillis became aware of Dickens' record, liked the song, and decided to cut it himself, which he did in 1967, reaching a respectable #11 on Billboard's country chart.

Shelton took producer Buckingham's advice and recorded "Life Turned Her That Way" for his debut Columbia album "Wild-Eyed Dream." He and Buckingham made one major alteration: Mel Tillis' version had been in 3/4 time (a waltz), and Ricky and Steve changed it to 4/4 time, thinking it would sound better that way. Later, they found out from Harlan Howard himself that he originally wrote it in 4/4, so

their change was fine with him. Shelton's new version of "Life Turned Her That Way" became the second of his ten #1 hits, reaching the summit on March 19, 1988.

Harlan Howard was inducted into the Country Music Hall Of Fame in 1997, one of only five non-performing songwriters so honored. The others are Boudleaux and Felice Bryant, Cindy Walker, Bobby Braddock, who co-wrote the super-classic "He Stopped Loving Her Today," and Hank Cochran. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Once A Day"
(written by Bill Anderson)

Connie Smith (#1, 1964)

In 1963, Connie Smith was a housewife and mother, spending her days and nights doing everything which that routine requires. She had little time for anything else, but on the rare occasions that she was able to get out of the house, she enjoyed singing at local events, fairs or some sort of stage show in the area. These moments spent under a small-time spotlight energized her.

Smith was in her early twenties in August of '63 when she entered a talent contest at the Frontier Ranch Country Music Park near Columbus, Ohio. It just so happened that one of Nashville's most-respected singer/songwriters, Bill Anderson, was performing at the venue and, when asked by management if he could spare a little bit of his time and help judge the talent contest between the matinee and nighttime shows, he said he'd be glad to. Connie came on the stage in a little homemade cowgirl outfit with a guitar that was nearly as big as she was! She sang Jean Shepard's 1955 Top Ten hit "I Thought Of You."

While Connie was performing, Anderson listened intently as she shaped the song in her unique, inflective, powerful style. During that period of time, most young female upstarts in country music were trying to sound either like Patsy Cline (who had died a few months before), or the "Queen Of Country Music," Kitty Wells. But Smith, Anderson noted, sounded refreshingly different. Her style was as singular as she was beautiful. Leaning back in his chair and taking in the way Connie wrapped her voice around each word, Bill thought that he might have discovered the next great female country music star.

Smith hadn't expected to meet and visit with Bill Anderson at the venue that day. In fact she didn't even know he was there. Anderson was already a top star, both as a songwriter and as a recording artist. Several months earlier, Bill had already nailed down one of the year's top hits with his #1 recording of "Still," Anderson approached Connie, offered his congratulations on winning the contest, visited with her a while, and then suggested that she come to Nashville and give the music business a shot. Smith was so overwhelmed that she passed off the invitation as just polite chit-chat, but the thing Connie didn't realize was that Anderson was serious.

Five months later, in January of 1964, Connie went to see Bill at one of his shows in Canton, Ohio. She told Anderson that she had been thinking over the music idea pretty seriously. By March, Bill had pulled some strings and arranged for her to come down to Music City and sing on Ernest Tubb's "Midnight Jamboree," a show that aired each week on WSM Radio following the "Grand Ole Opry" broadcast.

While she was in town, Anderson had her record a few demo tracks and he took them over to Owen Bradley, his producer at Decca Records. Unfortunately Bradley was convinced that his stable was full. He had recently signed Loretta Lynn, and felt that he just couldn't use another female singer at that time.

Anderson didn't give up and arranged a meeting with RCA Victor's A & R Director Chet Atkins. Chet was attentive and liked very much what he heard on Connie's demos, but then he dropped his own hammer (which was very similar to Owen's): "I've got three girl singers already here at RCA," Atkins explained. "Skeeter Davis, Dottie West and Norma Jean, and I can't even get enough material for them. How am I supposed to find songs for another girl singer?" Taking a deep breath, Anderson took the plunge. He told Chet, "If you sign Connie, I promise you that I will write more than enough songs for her."

And so it was. Connie signed a long-term contract with RCA Victor on June 24, 1964. Because Atkins found himself too busy with other artists, he assigned staff producer Bob Ferguson to helm Connie's sessions, which he did for many years until Connie's departure from RCA in November, 1972. Ironically, Connie announced her decision to leave the label the very same week that Eddy Arnold did the same thing. He had been with RCA for nearly thirty years.

After Smith signed her RCA contract, Anderson remembered the promise he had made to Chet that he would be able to deliver enough material for Connie, so Bill proceeded to get to work. He worked day and night trying to come up with songs for her first session, just three weeks away. Bill's first two creations proved solid. "I'm Ashamed Of You," and "The Threshold" were both good songs, but they weren't as commercial as Anderson thought they needed to be for a hit debut single. Continuing to mull over ideas, he finally came up with a tune he considered perfect. "Once A Day" had one of the best hook lines the master tunesmith ever conceived.

Smith's first RCA session took place on July 16, 1964 where she recorded four songs, the stand-out being "Once A Day," which was rush-released on August 1st. After "Once A Day" was shipped, radio station request lines lit up immediately. No one knew who this fresh, young singer was, but they couldn't wait to get her record. Customers came into record stores simply asking for "that once a day song." When the clerk would ask who the artist was, more often than not, the customer wouldn't know. It was simply unheard of that any female singer could have such huge success so quickly. Connie's debut reached the #1 position on Billboard's country singles chart on November 28, 1964 and stayed at the summit for eight weeks, capping one of Music City's most remarkable "Cinderella" stories.

"Once A Day" set records as the first debut single by a female country artist to top the Billboard chart (which didn't happen again until Trisha Yearwood's "She's In Love With The Boy" in 1991), and the most weeks at #1 (eight) by a female country artist. This latter record held for over 48 years until it was officially broken in 2013 when a bizarre rule change by Billboard Magazine combined with incorrect marketing allowed a decidedly non-country piece (in fact, it was pure rock) by pop star Taylor Swift to break Connie's mark. It's been said that "all records are made to be broken," but it's sad this one ended because of an unfortunate fluke. To me and all fans of true country music and truly great vocalists, Connie Smith's "Once A Day" will always be the real record-holder for most weeks at number one by a female country artist. Case closed. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Help Me Make It Through The Night"
(written by Kris Kristofferson)

Sammi Smith (#1 country, #8 pop, 1971)
Willie Nelson (#4, 1980)

Along with Johnny Cash, Bobby Bare was one of the early believers in Kris Kristofferson. In fact, Bare placed two Kristofferson-penned songs in the Top Ten, both in 1971: "Come Sundown" (#7) and "Please Don't Tell Me How The Story Ends" (#8). Kris told Bobby about a new piece he had just finished titled "Help Me Make It Through The Night," which Bare recorded as well, but his label (Mercury) hadn't released it yet. A few weeks later, Bobby was doing a show in Philadelphia and on the bill was an unknown twenty-seven year old singer from Oklahoma by the name of Sammi Smith. Sammi had been signed to Columbia Records a couple of years earlier and released three singles for the label, but none of them had become hits. So she bolted Columbia and signed with a new upstart label called Mega Records at about the time of the Philadelphia concert. Bare and Smith got to talking and she told Bobby that her new label was about to issue her recording of a song that she felt had some real potential: "Help Me Make It Through The Night." After her version was released, Mercury of course shelved Bare's. Looking back on the bad break, Bobby was reflective, saying that his cut had been recorded differently and perhaps wouldn't have been the monster hit that Sammi's was.

The "real potential" that Sammi Smith felt "Help Me Make It Through The Night" had, turned out to be one of the great understatements, as it became 1971's biggest crossover hit, reaching #1 for three weeks on Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart beginning February 13, 1971, and finishing at #8 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart, a huge tally for a country release. It earned a gold record award on April 26, 1971 and netted "Single of the Year" honors from The Country Music Association, plus a Grammy for "Best Country Song." Smith also took home the "Best Country Vocal Performance by a Female" Grammy award.

The writing of "Help Me Make It Through The Night" started when Kristofferson conceived the first line of the tune. That's all he had for some time, but the inspiration for the rest of it came while he was working as a helicopter pilot for an offshore oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. To pass the time one evening, Kris sat on the platform of his helicopter, strumming a twelve-string guitar. As he gazed at the stars, the rest of the number came to him pretty quickly. The song's title was based on an interview he had once read in which Frank Sinatra talked about using a bottle or a woman to get through the night.

The first person to record "Help Me Make It Through The Night" was an artist named Bill Nash, but his version went largely overlooked, partially because radio programmers felt that the song was too controversial. Dottie West also thought it was a bit risqué, and she refused to touch it. Sammi Smith, however, reportedly appreciated its frankness and she claimed to not see anything scandalous or distasteful about the song. After "Help Me Make It Through The Night," Smith never again even came close to the summit, although she continued placing singles in the lower rungs of Billboard's country charts through 1986. Sammi's only other appearance in the Top Ten was her 1975 cover of Merle Haggard's "Today I Started Loving You Again," and her version is, strangely enough, the highest-charting rendition of that classic, peaking at #9. Smith also tasted brief success as a composer, co-writing Waylon Jennings' #12 hit from 1971, "Cedartown, Georgia." She died of complications from emphysema on February 12, 2005 at the age of 61. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"I Don't Hurt Anymore"
(written by Don Robertson and Jack Rollins)

Hank Snow (#1, 1954)
Narvel Felts (#37, 1977)

Don Robertson was born half a world away from Music City. His father was a medical doctor and university professor heading up the Department of Medicine at Peking Union Medical College. In 1927, when Don was five, the family left China for the States, settling first in Boston, then a year later in Chicago. Don's early exposure to music consisted of listening to his father's classical record collection. At the age of only four, Don's mother enrolled the boy in piano classes and by seven he was already composing his own original pieces. Young Robertson might have kept his focus on a classical bent if it had not been for a vacation that expanded both his vision and his interest. When Don was nine, his family decided to spend the summer in Birchwood Beach, Michigan. After settling in, he found that a neighboring girl, Helga, was about his age. Within days the two became inseparable.

After a short while, Don began to watch and listen to Helga's father. The girl's dad was a gentle man who told fabulous stories and sang wonderful folk songs. Sitting at his feet, the boy began to gain an interest in the simple but fascinating music that seemed to be so important to the older man. The Robertsons enjoyed that first vacation so much that they would continue to spend summers in Birchwood Beach throughout their son's youth. As those years quickly passed, Don began to spend more time with Helga's father than he did with the young girl. The boy even began to understand that their neighbor was one of America's most renowned creative forces. By the time Don had left home for college, Helga's dad, Carl Sandburg, had left a deep impression on him.

Even though his piano talents had progressed to the point where he was making good money playing for dance bands, Robertson turned his back on music long enough to enter the University of Chicago's pre-med program. He had his mind set on becoming a doctor. Yet, after four years of study and hard work, he dropped out of college. There was music in the boy's soul, so he followed his heart rather than his mind and talked his way into a job as the musical arranger for Chicago radio station WGN. From there he toured the country with a live production show before finally settling down in Los Angeles in 1945.

Initially Robertson took a job as a demo pianist at Capitol Records. There he had a chance not only to show off his piano skills, but also to play some of his own classical and jazz compositions. When no one seemed interested in buying his pieces, he turned his attention to writing the kind of music he had heard at Carl Sandburg's feet. For eight years Don made his living at the piano while continuing, with little success, to try to interest someone in his folk songs. Stubbornly, he refused to give up, and kept showing his songs to every publishing employee who came to the sessions on which he played. Finally in 1953, Hill and Range Publishing Company offered Robertson a songwriting contract.

Within weeks Don had met some of the industry's most talented songwriters. At first he was teamed with Hal Blair, then he found himself working with Jack Rollins. Jack casually tossed Don some lyrics and asked him to go home and develop a melody to go with them. The lyrics that Don had taken home told a very personal story about the breakup of Rollins and a former girlfriend. Nothing too unusual there. Coupling the words to a country/folk score, Robertson named the new song "I Don't Hurt Anymore" and took it back to Rollins. They both agreed that it had potential, so they quickly made a demo and turned

it over to Hill and Range Publishing. While the writers resumed their work developing other new material, the publisher shipped their song to Music City.

In Nashville, the company's promoters took the song over to RCA and got it into the hands of Hank Snow. The "Singing Ranger" liked the way the song's melody fit his strong baritone voice. He also thought that Rollins' storyline was perfect for the country music market. Within a week, Snow was in the United Methodist Film, Television and Radio Commission (the building that RCA was leasing for sessions at that time) cutting "I Don't Hurt Anymore." Hank flubbed the opening line at the beginning of the recording (singing "It don't hurt anymore" instead of "I don't hurt anymore") but the mistake was left in, either because 1) nobody caught it, 2) it didn't compromise the song's storyline so they didn't feel the need to start over, or 3) the expense that RCA would have had to absorb by doing a second take. In those days very expensive acetate discs were used for recordings and if a mistake was made, it couldn't be fixed. You couldn't just start again or record over the mistake like you could with tape later on. The disc would have to simply be tossed into a trash can.

So the flub was left in, either inadvertently or on purpose, and Snow's record appeared on the Billboard country singles charts (there were three of them at the time) in late May of 1954. By June 19th, Don Robertson had earned his first #1 song. "I Don't Hurt Anymore" stayed at the top for twenty weeks and remained on the charts for forty-one weeks, making it the fifth biggest country hit of all time. Hank Snow, by the way, also holds the historical mark for having country's all-time biggest chart record: his self-penned "I'm Movin' On" from 1950, which spent twenty-one weeks at number one. Of Snow's 85 chart singles, "I Don't Hurt Anymore" ended up being his second-biggest hit.

After this first huge success, Don Robertson became one of the industry's most-recorded tunesmiths, not only in country music but in pop music as well. Elvis Presley cut more than a dozen of Don's songs, five of which appeared in Presley's numerous films. Pop stars such as Al Martino, Dean Martin, Frankie Laine and Connie Francis recorded Robertson's tunes. Some of his other highly-regarded compositions include an early Charley Pride hit "Does My Ring Hurt Your Finger" in 1967, Lorne Greene's #1 pop smash from 1964, "Ringo," "Born To Be With You" (by The Chordettes in the pop field and Sonny James in country), Eddy Arnold's "I Really Don't Want To Know," (a 1954 number one), "Ninety Miles An Hour (Down A Dead End Street)," also with Hank Snow (a #2 hit in '63), and "Please Help Me I'm Falling," a #1 blockbuster for Hank Locklin in 1960.

Additionally, Robertson originated and developed a new "slip note" sound for the piano that A-Team member Floyd Cramer first used on the Locklin record and continued to use on sessions well into the 1970s. Cramer also showcased this piano style (which became his trademark sound) on over fifty solo albums for RCA Victor. Don Robertson was inducted into the Nashville Songwriter's Hall of Fame in 1972, and passed away on March 16, 2015 at the age of 92. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Blanket On The Ground"
(written by Roger Bowling)

Billie Jo Spears (#1 country, #78 pop, 1975)

Billie Jo Spears was born in Beaumont, Texas (also George Jones' hometown) in 1938. She earned her first record deal after a performance at a local night club when a talent scout named John Rhodes persuaded her to move to Nashville. Billie Jo initially hooked up with United Artists Records, who were convinced that they had signed "a female George Jones" (Jones himself was recording for the label at the time). For what it's worth though, I think they already had a "female George Jones" on their roster. Her name was Melba Montgomery, with whom Jones had logged a Top Five single in 1963 called "We Must Have Been Out Of Our Minds." George always considered Melba the most compatible of all his duet partners, even though they had just that one lone hit together.

After only a brief period with United Artists, Billie Jo was label-shopping again and landed on Capitol where she notched her first big hit, the #4 "Mr. Walker, It's All Over" in 1969. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to follow it up with anything major. The next closest thing she had to a hit while at Capitol was a very good record in '70 called "Marty Gray," but that single peaked at only #17. Spears limped along on the Capitol label for another four years before returning to United Artists to finally land "the big one."

Billie Jo was getting set to begin work on a new album in 1975 and the day before her first session, producer Larry Butler was looking for a few more tunes. Roger Bowling was in Butler's office and had already played several songs when his manager, Paul Richey, suggested that he pitch "Blanket On The Ground." The song had made its way around Nashville for about three years, but invariably producers turned it down because of a line in the chorus about married people "slippin' around." Bowling expected the same reaction this time, but when he picked up a guitar and played the song, Butler immediately said, "We'll take it."

"Blanket On The Ground" was one of nineteen songs that Spears was instructed to learn inside and out prior to the session, but it was the only one she didn't bother to work on. She thought it was too controversial, and that Larry wouldn't record it on her anyway. Instead, out of the nineteen, Butler decided that "Blanket On The Ground" would be first, and despite Billie Jo's unfamiliarity with the tune, they nailed it on the second take.

As it turned out, the controversy never materialized. Actually, the line in question wasn't about slipping around with an outside lover, but about marital partners slipping around with each other. Once they began to record it in the studio, Billie Jo came to realize that it wasn't controversial at all. She thought, "Well, how great; what a clever idea." Upon its debut on February 1, 1975, "Blanket On The Ground" began to slowly build momentum and reached the summit of Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart April 26, 1975. It was the beginning of a pretty successful career the second time around with the United Artists label. Spears went on to chart thirteen more Top Twenty Billboard singles through 1980, including the #5 "What I've Got In Mind" (this went #1 on the Record World chart), "If You Want Me," (#8) and a remake of Wilma Burgess's 1966 classic "Misty Blue," which scored almost as well as Wilma's

#4 original; Billie Jo's version topping out at #5. Spears' last significant chart placement was her cover of Tammy Wynette's "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad" in 1981. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)"
(written by Wayne Carson)

Gary Stewart (#1, 1975)

Gary Stewart was born one of nine children in Letcher Country, Kentucky in 1944, but his family moved to Fort Pierce, Florida when he was twelve. Gary was playing music professionally on the road by the time he was sixteen, and eventually Mel Tillis caught his set one night at the Wagon Wheel Club in Okeechobee, Florida. Mel suggested that, in addition to continuing on with his singing, Stewart take up songwriting and move to Nashville. Jerry Bradley signed him to a contract with Forest Hills Publishing and Gary quickly co-wrote two big hits for Billy Walker, both of which peaked at #3 in 1970, "When A Man Loves A Woman" and "She Goes Walking Through My Mind." In 1971, Stewart moved back to Florida, but before leaving, he cut a demo tape featuring country versions of some of the old Motown rock classics. The tape found its way to producer Roy Dea, who brought Gary back to Music City to ink a record deal with RCA in 1973.

Dea once claimed that he never knew anybody who could simply blow him away like Gary Stewart could. Roy had witnessed the best of the best, everyone from Hank Williams to Elvis Presley, but when Stewart was at the top of his musical game, he couldn't be touched. Indeed, Gary's erratic vibrato and snarling renditions were a unique presence in country music. However, having said that, I think Stewart fell more or less into a "love or hate" category. He never reached the upper echelon of popularity, although he scored a career total of nine singles that made the Top Twenty, including his lone number one hit "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)." Wayne Carson wrote this one and four more of Gary's best-remembered songs, such as "Drinkin' Thing," "Oh, Sweet Temptation," "Ten Years Of This," (one of Bob Dylan's all-time favorite records), and "Whiskey Trip." Stewart's "Out Of Hand" album, which spawned "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)," has been hailed by music critics as a classic in the honky-tonk genre, regarded by some as the greatest honky-tonk country album ever recorded.

The chart-topping "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)" was a difficult record to make. Gary thought its arrangement was "rather confusing." With Roy Dea at the helm, they kept overdubbing instruments all over the road, putting some in and taking some off, little by little until Dea got just the right sound he wanted. Pete Drake's reliably fine steel guitar work was nothing short of spectacular, and the Jordanaires served up some of the finest background vocals that they had ever put on record. Even after all the overdubbing, the cut still sounded seamless, like it had gone down in one take. In reality however, "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)" was a tough one to do. It paid off though, coming in at #1 on Billboard's Hot Country Singles chart May 10, 1975.

Stewart's last Top Twenty entry came in March, 1978 with the aforementioned "Whiskey Trip" (#16), then the hit supply gradually began to tail off. Gary kept performing and later recorded a couple of duet albums with his friend, songwriter Dean Dillon. In 1983, the two co-wrote "Leave Them Boys Alone," a

salute to some of country music's wilder characters, and it turned into a #6 hit by Hank Williams, Jr., Waylon Jennings, and, in his final performance on record, Ernest Tubb. In spite of Stewart's successes, his life soon became turbulent due to a drug problem, a brief separation from his wife Mary Lou, and his son's suicide in 1987. Just three weeks after Mary Lou's death from pneumonia in November, 2003, Gary Stewart took his own life at his home in Fort Pierce, Florida. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Murder On Music Row"
(written by Larry Cordle and Larry Schell)

George Strait & Alan Jackson (#38, 2000)

Struggling songwriters Larry Cordle and Larry Schell had been friends for a number of years. They had composed a number of songs separately, but only one had made a major impact: Cordle's "Highway 40 Blues," a 1983 Ricky Skaggs hit. One day in 1999, Schell telephoned Cordle saying he had an unusual idea for a song and asked if he wanted to get in on it. Cordle was working mainly as a bluegrass artist at the time. He had just come off the road and was in the middle of recording a new album, so he wasn't particularly in the mood to write anything. Schell mentioned that he already had a title. He was going to call it "Murder On Music Row," and no sooner did he get that out of his mouth than Cordle replied, "Oh man, is it about killing country music?" Schell laughed and said, "yes." He knew that Cordle got the play on words right away. Cordle said, "Sign me on!"

The two men scheduled some time over the next few days to get together and write the song. It took just a few hours to complete. Cordle was making his new bluegrass album, but he didn't really think this was a bluegrass song. He considered it a traditional country tune, so that nixed any intentions he might have had of recording it. However, Cordle got out and performed it at a couple of well-known Nashville "listening room" venues where a lot of the musical "insiders" hung out. He played it first at the Bluebird Café to a tremendous, over-the-top response. Then it was on to the Station Inn for a similar rousing reception, completely overwhelming.

The final night came of the sessions for Cordle's bluegrass album, and around midnight he told the musicians, "Let's do this. I still need a demo to pitch." So "Murder On Music Row" was recorded and placed on a separate disc for Cordle to shop around, but he had a unique idea for the distribution: he took the disc and wrapped some of that police "crime scene" yellow tape around it and took it over to disc jockey Carl P. Mayfield at Nashville's WKDF-FM. Mayfield developed an entire website based on "Murder On Music Row." For over a month, the song was the centerpiece of his entire program, his mantra. The first day that Mayfield played "Murder On Music Row" on his show, he played it eight times (his program was only four hours long)! The CD demo Carl used had no label printed on it or anything. The song title was handwritten. WKDF's manager Erv Woolsey heard Mayfield playing it on the air and telephoned George Strait (a singer Woolsey had brought to Music City some twenty years earlier). He told George, "Have I got a song for you!"

MCA spokesperson Renee White called Cordle's cell phone while he was up in Louisville attending the International Bluegrass Music Association Convention, and she asked him if he would put a "hold" on

the song. He said, “Sure, Renee. I wasn’t planning to play it for anybody anyway.” She said, “Well, George Strait is thinking about doing it, and he’d like Alan Jackson to record it with him.” That was all the persuasion Cordle needed. He said, “Yes, absolutely. Tell ‘em to go for it!”

As Cordle and Schell were writing “Murder On Music Row,” they were expecting backlash from plenty of disgruntled industry personnel who wouldn’t like the song. However, the two men never received any negative reaction. In fact, it was quite the opposite. “Murder On Music Row” was honored as the Country Music Association’s “Song of the Year” in 2001, even though it was never promoted as a single. Radio programmers played the tune directly from George Strait’s CD collection “Latest, Greatest, Straitest Hits,” and the song reached #38 on Billboard’s country singles chart on that basis alone. It remained on the chart for a solid five months. Additionally, George and Alan won the 2001 CMA “Vocal Event of the Year” award for their collaborative efforts. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“Nobody”
(written by Kye Fleming and Dennis Morgan)

Sylvia (#1 country, #15 pop, 1982)

When Sylvia took Kye Fleming and Dennis Morgan’s composition “Nobody” to #1, it was a celebration for three friends. The songwriters both worked for Tom Collins at Pi Gem Publishing, the same company where Sylvia Kirby got her start as a receptionist.

Dropping her last name, Sylvia got her RCA record deal through Collins in late 1979. A couple of years later, she was in the process of putting together a new album called “Just Sylvia.” She already had ten pretty good songs lined up for the project, but she asked her friends Fleming and Morgan if they could come up with something a little stronger. Kye and Dennis went to work on “Nobody,” finishing it up the night before Sylvia’s final session for the album. They rushed in and delivered the song to her the next morning even before having a chance to cut a demo tape on it.

The writers auditioned “Nobody” live for Sylvia right there in the office at Pi Gem. She was instantly drawn to it and learned the song right then and there for the 2:00 session that afternoon at Nashville’s Sound Emporium. The three-hour time frame was spent recording another song (“Like Nothing Ever Happened,” which eventually turned out to be “Nobody’s” follow-up) and polishing up earlier material. Before they knew it, there was only twenty minutes left on the session and work on “Nobody” hadn’t yet begun. So guitarist Pete Bordonali, bass player Joe Osborn and drummer Buster Phillips quickly laid down the basic instrumental tracks on the third take. Sylvia hastily completed her vocals, but time ran out and a special overdub session was arranged for the next day.

Producer Collins was pleased with most of Sylvia’s performance, having her re-do only a couple of words. Overdubs started with Shane Keister and Bobby Ogdin on synthesizers and The Cherry Sisters (Sherry Huffman, Diane Tidwell and Lisa Silver) blending in their sassy back-up vocals. Sylvia insists, “They made that record.”

Released on May 14, 1982, “Nobody” slammed into the #1 spot on Billboard’s country singles chart on August 21st, and reached a high-water mark of #15 on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart as well. The disc earned a “gold record” award on December 21, 1982 for its sales of one million units. Sylvia logged four more Top Ten singles through 1985, but then took a hiatus from recording to devote time to more personal matters. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

“Forever and Ever, Amen”
(written by Don Schlitz and Paul Overstreet)

Randy Travis (#1, 1987)

Songwriter Paul Overstreet migrated to Nashville from his hometown of Antioch, Mississippi at the dawn of the 1980s. He toiled at his craft unknown and unnoticed in Music City for several years until a twist of fate teamed him with another writer by the name of Don Schlitz. Don had already tasted enormous success with his song “The Gambler,” a mega-hit for Kenny Rogers back in 1978. Meanwhile, Overstreet had been caught up in the grip of alcoholism for several years. He turned to religion, and fortunately was able to find sobriety and turn his life around just before he and Schlitz started writing together. One of the first songs they penned was Randy Travis’s “On The Other Hand.” Not surprisingly, when that song hit the top of the charts, Randy wanted the team to produce another golden moment for him.

The idea for “Forever and Ever, Amen” was obtained from the combination of a prayer and an exclamation of love. As Don’s wife would tuck their young son into bed at night, the boy would say his prayers and finish up by saying, “Mommy, I love you forever and ever, amen.” Thinking about the sweet innocence in that childhood message, Don took the idea to Paul. On a warm evening, the two men sat out on Overstreet’s front porch at sundown and began to write. When it became too dark to see, they lit candles, thinking the porch light would attract too many bugs. By candlelight, it became a strain to see well enough to write out the words on a legal pad, but knowing all along that the song was going to be a smash kept the guys motivated to keep writing even with the extremely dim light. In a couple of hours, “Forever and Ever, Amen” was finished, and they went in the next day and recorded a very sparse demo on it, with just voice and guitar.

The two guys high-tailed it over to Warner Bros. offices to play the demo for label executive Martha Sharp, who screened most of the material earmarked for Travis, and she agreed that the song would be an immediate hit. Travis loved it, instantly scheduling studio time to record the number for a new album project he and his producer Kyle Lehning were working on, as yet untitled. As Randy and Kyle listened to “Forever and Ever, Amen,” they realized, after some brief thought, that they had the title of Travis’s second album staring them right in the face: “Always and Forever.”

“Forever and Ever, Amen” was chosen to be the lead-off single from the new album, debuting on Billboard’s country singles chart on April 25, 1987. Warner Bros. released the “Always and Forever” album on May 4th. Within two months it had gone platinum with over a million units sold, largely due to the incredible power of “Forever and Ever, Amen,” which had reached #1 on June 13th and stayed there

for three weeks, the first single to do that since Johnny Lee's "Lookin' For Love" seven years earlier. "Forever and Ever, Amen" picked up two Grammy awards and earned honors as "Single of the Year" from the Country Music Association (Travis also garnered a "Male Vocalist of the Year" trophy at the CMA telecast), and "Song of the Year" from the Academy of Country Music.

Meanwhile, Randy's "Always and Forever" album was still racking up big sales and big chart numbers. On July 11, 1987 it became the first country album to reach the top twenty of Billboard's pop album chart since Kenny Rogers' "Eyes That See In The Dark" in November of 1983. On June 4, 1988, "Always and Forever" (which by then had gone triple-platinum) completed a remarkable run: 43 weeks at the top of Billboard's country album chart. That easily eclipsed the previous mark of 28 weeks at #1 for Alabama's "Mountain Music." – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Walking The Floor Over You"
(written by Ernest Tubb)

Ernest Tubb (#23 pop, 1941)
George Hamilton IV (#18, 1965)
Ernest Tubb (w/Merle Haggard) (#31, 1979)

As a child growing up in the tiny community of Crisp, Texas, Ernest Tubb spent hours playing cowboy. Until he heard Jimmie Rodgers singing on the radio, his life's goal was to be a western movie star. But Rodgers' plaintive yodeling changed all that. Dreams of riding a horse through a Hollywood movie set gave way to music. Throughout his teens, Tubb diligently saved every one of his hard-earned pennies and nickels in order to purchase each new Jimmie Rodgers release. Such was his devotion that when Jimmie's body finally gave in to tuberculosis in 1933, it seemed that part of Ernest died too.

Until Rodgers' death, imitating the "Blue Yodeler" had been strictly a Tubb hobby. A common laborer, Ernest was working construction when a friend suggested that he purchase a guitar and make some money in music. The twenty-one year old man followed that advice, taught himself to play the guitar, and within two years had wrangled a singing spot on San Antonio radio station KONO. A few weeks later, Tubb boldly walked up to the late Jimmie Rodgers' home in Kerrville, Texas and talked his way inside. That day, he met Rodgers' widow Carrie for the first time, establishing a friendship that would last for the next twenty-five years until her death in 1961. Upon their first meeting, Carrie was impressed with the stranger's sincerity, frank nature and country charm, and even though Tubb professed to be a self-proclaimed imitator of Rodgers, Carrie didn't think that he sounded very much like her late husband. But sensing that a young musician with a wife and a young son needed every break he could get, Carrie telephoned RCA and convinced the label to offer her uninvited "discovery" a contract. In an attempt to give the man a dose of good luck, Mrs. Rodgers even lent the singer her husband's favorite guitar. In Tubb's mind, this was like receiving a divine blessing. How could he fail with all of this working for him? Ernest believed that success was right around the corner.

RCA cut eight sides with Ernest. These songs were largely Tubb-penned efforts paying tribute to his idol Rodgers. The four singles that RCA released went nowhere. Soon, the label lost all interest in the Texan

and dropped his contract. Over the course of the next three years, Tubb worked one-night stands around Texas for as little as two dollars a show. Frustrated by his lack of success, and just one step ahead of the bill collectors, he again contacted Carrie Rodgers. Ernest knew that this was a last desperate act. As was her nature, Carrie again came to Tubb's rescue.

In the spring of 1940, Mrs. Rodgers recommended Ernest to Decca Records. At his audition, Tubb sang four songs for label head David Kapp. By this time, Ernest was no longer just another Jimmie Rodgers clone. He had developed his own easy-paced style. Kapp liked what he heard and thought that, with the right material, he could sell this voice in the rural markets. He signed the singer to a royalty-based contract. Using the Decca deal as leverage, Tubb then landed a spot on KGKO in Fort Worth. Finding a flower company to sponsor his show, he suddenly found himself pulling down the unheard-of sum of $75 a week. The Tubb family felt rich. Still, a year later, after his first six Decca releases went nowhere, Ernest was again having doubts.

While preparing for what was to be a monumental recording session, the singer was presented with a stack of bills. It seemed that his wife Lois had gone on a shopping spree and had run up charges Tubb couldn't pay. An argument ensued and Mrs. Tubb left with their son to visit her mother. Ernest, now known on radio as the Troubadour, was left at home to think things over. The next day when he came home from work, Lois was still gone, and the usually upbeat Tubb sank into a deep depression. Alone, angry and worried about both the finances and the upcoming Decca session, Ernest began to pace back and forth in the small upstairs apartment that the family called home. The more he walked, the more mad he became. After several hours of mindless steps, he stopped to consider what his all-night anguish was accomplishing. It was then that inspiration struck. Sitting down with a pen and paper, he quickly wrote out his emotions in a song, calling it "Walking The Floor Over You."

When Dave Kapp put together Tubb's next session in Dallas, Ernest suggested they record the song he had written on that long night. As the session concluded, Kapp admitted that while he liked "Walking The Floor Over You," he favored putting out "I Wonder Why You Said Goodbye" as the single. The lanky singer had a gut feeling that "Walking The Floor Over You" was a song that the public could most relate to, so he argued to have it released first. After some discussion, Kapp and Decca finally gave in and in August, 1941, "Walking The Floor Over You" was shipped to radio stations. The pure hillbilly number immediately caught fire and soared to #23 on the national pop charts (country charts did not come into existence until 1944), and instantly became the biggest-selling record in the South and Southwest regions of the country. The song was a jukebox favorite, and quickly became a honky-tonk anthem. It also bought Tubb's ticket to Nashville and the Grand Ole Opry as well as assuring his long association with Decca Records which lasted through 1973. Over the course of the next dozen years, the Texas Troubadour would place another ten records on the pop side, the highest tally being his #10 peak of a cover of Gordon Jenkins' 1950 chart-topper "Goodnight Irene." All told, Tubb placed ninety-one singles on Billboard's country charts, fifty-eight of them obtaining top ten status with five reaching #1. "Walking The Floor Over You" would find its way onto the country playlists two more times, in 1965 when George Hamilton IV took it to #18, and again in 1979 when Ernest himself re-recorded it as a duet with Merle Haggard for a #31 peak, ironically turning out to be his final appearance on the national charts. Vern Gosdin paid homage to the song and Tubb with his 1988 number one hit "Set 'Em Up Joe."

Perhaps even more important than his own recording success was Tubb's eye for recognizing talent. Never forgetting what Carrie Rodgers had done for him, Tubb was constantly bringing new acts to the attention of the record labels. He would also put untested entertainers on a bill just to give them a chance to win audience recognition and gain valuable experience. Country music stars Jack Greene and

Cal Smith were among the many who got their start in his band. Ernest gave future stars Loretta Lynn, Tanya Tucker and a host of others some of their initial breaks. In 1947, Tubb was the first country performer to appear in New York's famed Carnegie Hall. When country music was still a regional music form, he became a worldwide traveler who entertained our servicemen in several different countries. Not blessed with immense talent, Tubb nevertheless shared a generous spirit that millions of fans could see in every one of his shows. While others may have had a better voice, none had a heart that wanted to give back to the industry he loved more than Ernest did. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Long Black Train"
(written by Josh Turner)

Josh Turner (#13, 2004)

The year was 2000 and Hannah, South Carolina native Josh Turner had come to Nashville to study music at Belmont University. One night he ventured over to the campus library, where he became immersed in a collection of music he discovered there. Mercury Records had acquired the entire MGM Hank Williams catalog and was in the process of releasing not only Williams' well-known hits, but also many rare cuts that even MGM hadn't issued in the years since Hank's 1953 death. Much to Turner's excitement, the library had the complete boxed set of Hank Williams' recordings on file, and Josh was intently listening through a pair of head phones in order to not bother anyone around.

The old, classic music by country music's most iconic legend energized and inspired Turner. It seemed that Josh entered a whole new world that night. After listening to the Hank Williams tracks, he wanted to break down the music to its rawest form, as Hank had done decades earlier. As Josh started walking back to his apartment, which was on the other side of the campus, he had a vision of a wide-open space on the plains with a railroad track running straight through the middle of the field. It was completely dark, but you could see everything around. A harvest moon was lighting up the sky, and in Josh's mind he could see a throng of people standing along the track. A long, beautiful, shiny black train was coming down the track and the people were trying to decide whether to get on board. Somehow they knew this train led to nowhere, but they were wondering what it would be like to ride on it. As Turner was imagining all of this in his mind while walking back to his apartment, he wondered what it all meant. Josh finally understood that the train was a symbol for temptation.

After returning to his apartment, Turner picked up his guitar and strummed a B flat chord. Although it was late, the lyrics started pouring out and he wrote three verses and a chorus before turning in. After arising the next morning, a feeling came over him that the song wasn't quite finished and by 11:00 AM, he had written the fourth and final verse. After "Long Black Train" was completed, doubts started overshadowing Josh and he began to feel that it was all in vain. He thought, "Nobody is going to want to hear this song. It's too old-fashioned. Listeners won't understand the metaphor anyway."

Fortunately, a friend heard Josh playing the song one day and suggested he perform it as part of his senior recital. Then it started snowballing. Josh started doing "Long Black Train" at showcases and writers' nights around Music City. Before long, he recorded a demo of the tune there at Belmont

University and played it in one of his classes. A fellow classmate was interning at a publishing company owned by Jody Williams and she asked Josh if she could take the song over there and play it for Williams. Josh said, “Sure,” and soon the classmate came back and said, “Jody wants to sit down and talk with you.” Not only did Williams sign Turner to a publishing contract, but got him an audition at MCA Records, where he inked a recording deal in November of 2001.

Although Josh hadn’t yet released “Long Black Train,” some strings were pulled and he was invited to sing at the Grand Ole Opry (customarily held at the Opry’s former home The Ryman Auditorium during the winter months) the Friday before Christmas, on December 21, 2001. At the time, nobody had ever heard of Turner when he walked out on the stage that night. He was understandably scared to death. Josh started singing “Long Black Train” (remember now, this song hadn’t yet been released), and the audience just erupted. People were standing up and cheering even before Josh finished the song. He was completely overwhelmed. After the performance, Bill Anderson (who was hosting that segment of the show) stepped up to the microphone and said, “Do you want to hear some more?” and the crowd got even louder! During Josh’s encore of “Long Black Train,” he looked up into the balcony and realized it was the same view that Hank Williams saw from the legendary Ryman stage decades before. It was Hank’s music which had inspired Turner to compose “Long Black Train” in the first place.

For some unexplained reason, it was a year-and-a-half after that Grand Ole Opry appearance before “Long Black Train” finally debuted on Billboard’s country singles chart on May 31, 2003. Personally, I think it would have been a bigger hit if it had been released on the heels of Turner’s phenomenally-successful Opry bow, but I guess MCA had its reasons for holding it back. Radio airplay was good but not sensational, and the single peaked at only #13 on the national playlist, so Josh was at least partially correct in his assessment that the song’s old-fashioned style would hinder its exposure. Amazingly though, it lingered on Billboard’s survey for an incredible forty-four weeks (almost double the number of weeks of most major hits), giving “Long Black Train” the distinction of achieving the longest Billboard chart duration without reaching the Top Ten. Despite this, the single was still certified gold by the RIAA for sales in excess of 500,000 units.

“Long Black Train” became the title track of Turner’s first album and MCA sent him out on the concert trail to promote it. There, Josh discovered that many of the song’s fans had very differing ways of relating to it. They would tell him, “My brother is battling alcoholism,” or “My sister is going through a drug addiction,” things like that. Josh realized that “Long Black Train” was a song for everybody. Each of us has our own weaknesses and our own struggles. We all have our own “Long Black Train.”

Turner went to the state of Alabama to do a promotional event for a radio station right after the song was released, and a lady pulled Josh aside after the show. She said, “Josh, I just want you to know that I’ve struggled with depression for years, and the other day I had a whole bottle of painkillers and I was going to take the whole bottle and end it all. The radio in my bedroom was on and at that moment “Long Black Train” began playing. I started listening to the words, and I realized how selfish I would be by committing suicide.” She said, “That song changed my life. I flushed the pills down the toilet and walked away a different person.” She told Josh that she had almost fully recovered from her depression because of his song, and it was then that Turner realized just how powerful “Long Black Train” actually is. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Green, Green Grass Of Home"
(written by Curly Putman)

Porter Wagoner (#4, 1965)
Tom Jones (#11 pop, 1967)

In the early 1960s, Curly Putman was a shoe salesman, working at several Thom McAn shoe stores throughout the South, most-often at the Huntsville, Alabama and Memphis, Tennessee outlets. He was a part-time singer/guitarist, and even dabbled in songwriting now and then. In the back of his mind, Curly even thought that one day, he might make a living in the music industry, so he ventured to Nashville from time to time to try to make some contacts. One day in 1964, Putman had a chance to meet with Buddy Killen, who was the co-founder of Nashville's highly-acclaimed Tree Publishing Company. Buddy gave Curly a job as a song promoter, which consisted of listening to newly submitted tapes, and pitching the songs that he deemed worthy, to the artists.

While working at his new job at Tree Publishing, Putman had an idea for a song. He had remembered seeing the movie "The Asphalt Jungle" with Sterling Hayden in the lead, playing a bank robber. The final, memorable scene is what stuck with him: the bank robber (Hayden) gets within view of his old country home up on a hill, when the police catch up with him and kill him. That was the basic foundation for "Green, Green Grass Of Home."

Putman went to work on the song and had it finished in just a couple of hours. The initial response from music executives was that the song sounded "dated," like something that might have been recorded 20 years before. But Curly didn't give up, and pitched the song to producer Kelso Herston, who needed a good song for one of his new artists, Johnny Darrell. Darrell was working as the manager of Holiday Inn's Nashville location on West End Avenue, but had just signed with United Artists and wanted to get his recording career going. He was the first to record "Green, Green Grass Of Home," but his record didn't reach the national playlists. A couple of years later though, Johnny Darrell's original version of "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town" reached the Top Ten on Billboard's country singles chart over two years before Kenny Rogers' version became a monster hit on the pop charts.

While Darrell's recording of "Green, Green Grass Of Home" didn't become a hit, it brought the song to the attention of Porter Wagoner, who immediately recorded the tune, and it went all the way to #4 on Billboard's country chart. From there, "Green, Green Grass Of Home" snowballed. Jerry Lee Lewis covered Porter's record. Then pop singer Tom Jones heard Jerry Lee's version and covered it again. Jones' version became a world-wide pop hit, and was the biggest overall rendition of the song in terms of royalties and airplay.

Porter Wagoner loved doing recitations, and did them extremely well. It was his idea to recite (instead of sing) the last verse on his recording of "Green, Green Grass Of Home," and after that, all subsequent versions featured that spoken-word narration on the last verse.

"Green, Green Grass Of Home" was only the second of Putman's songs to be recorded. Charlie Walker had cut one of his songs while Curly was still living in Alabama, but it hadn't become a hit. Putman wrote "Green, Green Grass Of Home" just three months after moving to Nashville to work for Tree Publishing Company. A modest start to what would become a very lucrative songwriting career. Billboard Magazine

ranks Curly Putman the 18th most prolific country music songwriter of all time, with 104 of his songs becoming hits (Harlan Howard tops the list, with Bob McDill, Bill Anderson, Billy Sherrill and Bill Rice rounding out the top five). “Green, Green Grass Of Home” (along with a co-writing credit with Bobby Braddock on George Jones’ “He Stopped Loving Her Today”) is Putman’s most acclaimed work, and reportedly has been recorded by over 700 different artists in every major language in the world. It even served as the basis for a couple of movie scripts. Not too shabby for a former Alabama shoe salesman. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

”Pick Me Up On Your Way Down”
(written by Harlan Howard)

Charlie Walker (#2, 1958)

Harlan Howard seemed to be born to write songs. As a child growing up in Detroit, he listened with his parents to the Grand Ole Opry and fell in love with the music of Ernest Tubb. Blessed with a wonderful ear, he could pick up the “Texas Troubadour’s” melodies easily enough, but sometimes young Harlan couldn’t remember all the words. When this happened, he didn’t resort to humming or mumbling, he simply wrote his own lyrics on the spot. As he sang these new words to Tubb’s well-worn melodies, he dreamed of joining his hero in Nashville, but Michigan was a long way from Tennessee, especially for a poor boy.

Using three or four chords and an old guitar, Harlan continued to expand his songwriting skills as a teenager, and then later while serving a hitch in the Army. He got ideas for songs everywhere. Sometimes, a concept came from something somebody said. Other times, inspiration might hit in the form of something he had seen at school or on the streets. And throughout this time, every chance he got, he would grab a ride to Nashville to listen to his favorite acts live at the Ryman Auditorium. He would also spend his spare hours knocking on doors and trying to make contacts in Music City, but invariably he would return to his Army base with little to show but empty pockets and tired feet.

Upon completing his military service, Harlan worked factory jobs in Detroit, then in Arizona and finally Los Angeles. Still writing songs, he impressed Johnny Bond and Tex Ritter enough to have them buy a few of his original compositions. Yet, neither performer did anything with Harlan’s songs. By and large, like most aspiring talents, Howard found a lot more dead ends than helping hands, a lot more reasons to quit than continue. Yet, he never gave up. As if it were therapy, he continued to write about almost everything he observed.

One night, while hanging out at a smoky West Coast honky-tonk, Harlan finally received his biggest break. Ironically, this wonderful opportunity came in the form of a lovers’ spat. Howard was watching a young couple fussing at the club. After they had argued for a while, the girl walked off. When she did, the man yelled at her, “Well, you can just pick me up on your way down.” Harlan thought about the incident, and especially that line, for the rest of the night, and when he arrived home he took a pen and paper and had the song finished by morning.

It took only a few hours for the assembly-line worker to transfer a lovers' quarrel into a country music classic, but even after "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down" came together, Howard still didn't have the contacts to connect it with people who could turn it into a hit. However, he did have a friend in Nashville who happened to work for Pamper Music Publishing, who asked Harlan to mail him a copy of the song and he would try to plug it. Howard didn't know anything about Pamper Music, but he trusted his friend and mailed the song to him.

True to his word, the friend started working Howard's song. A demo was made and over the course of the next few weeks, "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down" made the rounds in Music City. It finally ended up on the desk of a golfing buddy of Ray Price. The works of most unknown writers usually collect more dust than interest, but not in this case. For some reason, this demo got played.
Charlie Walker was a San Antonio disc jockey who had a strong background as a country musician. One of the nation's favorite on-air talents, he wanted to become a recording star in his own right. Decca had given him a shot in the mid-fifties, but his "Only You, Only You" had stayed on the chart for just two weeks. In early 1958 he convinced Columbia to give him a second chance. Relying on almost fifteen years of experience spinning hits on the radio, Charlie picked out Harlan's composition as a potential winner. Columbia released Walker's recording of "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down" in late fall. The label was convinced that it was destined to be a big record but Harlan Howard was a bit more skeptical. He certainly wanted his song to be a hit, but he had never heard of Charlie Walker and wasn't very confident at the time.

"Pick Me Up On Your Way Down" rode the Billboard country chart for the remainder of 1958 and a good portion of 1959. It peaked at #2 for four weeks, but unfortunately, in a recording career that lasted through 1974, this record proved to be Walker's only major hit. He entered the Top Ten only two other times, but both of those are forgotten today. The significance of the release of "Pick Me Up On Your Way Down" is that it opened the door for Harlan Howard, a man who was to become, and still remains, country music's all-time most prolific songwriter, with 147 of his more than 400 compositions becoming hits. At one point in 1961, fifteen of his tunes were listed on Billboard's country singles chart at the same time, an unprecedented mark which still stands today.

Howard wasn't quite confident enough to quit his job in Los Angeles after that first hit, but within a year, he finally did make his boyhood dream come true after writing a second blockbuster which turned out to be even bigger than the first. "Heartaches By The Number" took Ray Price to #3 on Billboard's country chart and a pop singer named Guy Mitchell (who also happened to be from Detroit) propelled it all the way to #1 for two weeks on the Billboard Hot 100. Only then did Harlan finally decide that this songwriting thing might work and he made his move to Nashville. In doing so, he reshaped Music City forever. Harlan Howard was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1997, one of only five non-performing songwriters so honored. The others are Cindy Walker, Bobby Braddock, Hank Cochran and the husband and wife songwriting team of Boudleaux and Felice Bryant. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Making Believe"
(written by Jimmy Work)

Jimmy Work (#5, 1955)
Kitty Wells (#2, 1955)
Emmylou Harris (#8, 1977)

When Jimmy Work was still attending high school in his small hometown of Dukedom, Tennessee, had already honed his songwriting skills to a point where he had a contract with Cole Publishing. The boy was sure that he wanted to make his living in the music business. No matter the obstacles, Work was determined to end up in Nashville. Usually dreams take a very long time to be realized, and Jimmy's were no exception. In the 1940s, there simply wasn't enough money writing country songs to make a solid living, so the young man had to move north and take a factory job in Detroit. He didn't leave the South without his guitar, and almost before he unpacked Jimmy began playing. Late into the night, the young Tennessean sang at many of the night clubs where displaced Southerners came to drink away their homesickness and listen to their kind of music. Along with serving up entertainment in the bars at night and working his factory job during the day, Jimmy landed a singing gig on radio station WCAR in Pontiac.

For a decade, Jimmy followed that day-to-day regimen, trying to keep the bills paid and get his music career off the ground. With each passing year it seemed that his chances grew slimmer and slimmer. He finally managed to be in the right place at the right time to be noticed by Dot Records. The company offered Work a recording contract in hopes that he could turn some of his original compositions into hits. One of the first numbers they decided to try was a song that had taken Jimmy less than a half-hour to write. It was called "Making Believe."

In one of his last musical accomplishments before his death in December, 1954, publisher Fred Rose took "Making Believe" to Dot producer Randy Wood, and Jimmy's confidence was buoyed as the label agreed that this song could earn the singer a spot on the national charts. As he continued his job on the assembly line, Work couldn't help but wonder if his new record might just be the ticket that could take him back home to Tennessee. However, he also considered the irony that he might just be fooling himself, setting himself up for a hard fall into a pit called reality.

With the cold north wind blowing and snow falling on Detroit's gray streets, Dot shipped "Making Believe" to radio stations and record outlets in January, 1955. By February 19th, it had made the national listings and eventually moved up to a peak of #5. With the song registering on all of Billboard's three major country charts ("retail," "jukebox" and "jockey") for over three months, Jimmy had realized a dream. But his shining moment was short-lived. "Making Believe" would be one of only two songs that Work would ever place on the national charts as a singer.

Two years earlier, Kitty Wells had broken through as country music's first genuine female star as a solo performer with her monster #1 hit "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels," and had been cranking out a generous supply of Top Ten singles ever since, even logging another number one, "One By One," a duet with Red Foley. She had heard Jimmy Work's recording of "Making Believe," loved the song and decided to record her own version of it, which landed on Billboard's country charts about a month after Work's. Kitty's rendition quickly soared to #2, but that's where it stayed for an incredible

fifteen weeks, unable to slip past Webb Pierce's reign of twenty-one weeks at the top with his cover of Jimmie Rodgers' "In The Jailhouse Now," the third biggest country hit of all time. With its fifteen weeks at #2, Kitty Wells' "Making Believe" still holds the all-time record for a song in the runner-up position on any Billboard chart.

Two decades after the Jimmy Work and Kitty Wells records of "Making Believe" finished their chart runs, a country music newcomer made the song her fifth straight Top Ten hit. In her day, Emmylou Harris was sometimes referred to as the "Keeper Of The Flame" because of her penchant for covering old country classics, such as the Louvin Brothers' "If I Could Only Win Your Love," Buck Owens' "Together Again," Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams" and "Back In Baby's Arms," Loretta Lynn's "Blue Kentucky Girl," Floyd Cramer's "Last Date," (with lyrics by Conway Twitty), Merle Haggard's "Today I Started Loving You Again," and Hank Snow's "I'm Movin' On." Her clear, rural-edged voice was used very proficiently to celebrate the genre's real country sounds. Harris was doing hard country even when middle-of-the-road stars were controlling the charts. In spite of what seemed to be her adoration for the sounds of traditional country music, many industry personnel feared and mistrusted her. This was probably due to her well-known West coast upbringing and musical beginnings. Before Emmylou arrived on the country charts, she was judged primarily as a folk singer, but she often performed on the same bills as some of the better-known rock bands. In a period when female country singers wore "big" hair and elaborate costumes, Harris had long, straight hair and sang in either old blue jeans or peasant dresses. Even though she sounded like she could have been a member of the Grand Ole Opry, folks didn't really quite know what to make of her.

Over time, with her soft, strong style, Emmylou won converts. She was modest, but always ready with a quick smile, and her angelic voice and tremendous devotion to old-fashioned country music began to make a deep impression on the Music City establishment. Using primarily beloved standards, Harris built a foundation for her career on the Reprise label in 1975. She then signed a deal with Warner in early 1977. With her second single on her new label, she reached #8 with the classic "Making Believe." As she passionately threw herself into the song, it seemed as if Emmylou had really lived the story. Using her old West coast buddy Herb Pederson for backup harmonies, Harris's very simple and heartfelt approach to "Making Believe" solidified the composition as a country music mainstay and made her remake a well-remembered version. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Good Ole Boys Like Me"
(written by Bob McDill)

Don Williams (#2, 1980)

Next to Harlan Howard, Bob McDill is officially listed by Billboard Magazine as country music's most prolific songwriter, with over 150 of his compositions appearing on Billboard's country singles chart, many reaching classic status. McDill's fishing buddy Tom Connelly, who wrote several books about the Civil War, ignited Bob's renewed interest in Southern literature and introduced him to the works of Robert Penn Warren, who won the 1949 Pulitzer Prize for "All The King's Men." McDill was fascinated

with Warren's material, and his final novel, "A Place To Come To," was the inspiration for Bob's song, "Good Ole Boys Like Me."

In his song, McDill threw in his radio-listening habits while growing up along the coast of East Texas. He was mesmerized by a radio station out of Nashville that came beaming into his area (and most of the country) at night via its 50,000 watt sky wave signal. It wasn't WSM, but Nashville's other clear-channel AM powerhouse, WLAC. While WSM blasted the nation with country music, WLAC, at the other end of the dial, played rhythm & blues (back then, it was legitimately called "race music"). A group of disc jockeys, (John Richbourg, Gene Nobles, Herman Grizzard & Bill "Hoss" Allen) made up the staff that played these records on WLAC late at night. They were known as the "50,000 Watt Quartet." Arguably, Richbourg (who shortened his air name to "John R.") was the most well-known of the group, not only for his unique on-air patter, but also in his personal efforts to help struggling new R & B performers, many of whom later became top stars in their field due to John R.'s assistance. The radio personality also maintained a second career as a record producer and promoter. McDill gives a heartfelt "tip of the hat" to John R. in "Good Ole Boys Like Me."

Bob also calls upon several other familiar names in his lyrics. The famous rock disc jockey Wolfman Jack is mentioned, as are "the Williams boys," (referring to Tennessee Williams, the great novelist and playwright, and Hank Williams, country music's most iconic and legendary figure). McDill had listened to Wolfman Jack during his brief time at the Mexican "border-blaster" station XERF, just across the international boundary from Del Rio, Texas. It was here that the Wolfman arguably built his greatest reputation, and where he had made his biggest impression on young McDill in the early to mid-1960s. Years later, after writing "Good Ole Boys Like Me," Bob realized that a few of the lines in the song might not mean very much to folks who hadn't grown up in the South listening to rhythm & blues music on the radio, but the song became a hit anyway.

When McDill reached adulthood, he migrated up to Memphis to break into the music scene as a R & B songwriter. He was doing his best trying to write the music that he felt he was destined for (pop and blues stuff), but late one night he went riding around town with some friends and George Jones' "A Good Year For The Roses" came on the car radio. It hit Bob like a ton of bricks. He listened closely to the words and an instant, powerful revelation overtook him. There was a real rage bubbling underneath those lyrics, something McDill had never experienced before. It was at that moment that Bob decided to switch his musical focus and start writing country songs.

After McDill moved to Nashville, one of his staunchest supporters was Don Williams. In all, thirteen of Bob's compositions became hits for Williams. Bob played "Good Ole Boys Like Me" for Don, and to his surprise, Williams didn't snap it up like he usually did when Bob offered him a song. Instead, Don told McDill that he would take it upon himself to pitch it to Kenny Rogers, thinking it might be a bigger hit with Kenny since he was having a lot of crossover success at that time. However, Rogers passed on "Good Ole Boys Like Me" saying, "It's too literary, it's too esoteric." So Williams called Bob and said, "Kenny turned it down, so I guess you'll have to settle for me cutting it." Bob said, "That's fine with me!" (secretly hoping that Don would be the one to do it).

By the late '70s, McDill had become friends with Bill "Hoss" Allen. Long retired from WLAC, which had dropped the rhythm & blues programming years earlier, the "50,000 Watt Quartet" had faded into history. Soon after "Good Ole Boys Like Me" was released, McDill and Allen were sitting around talking and Hoss remarked, "some S. O. B. put John R. in a song." Bob said, "Yeah, I'm that S. O. B." One day the two men were sitting on a bench, and sitting on the other side of Hoss was a woman in her mid-forties.

She knew who he was, and she said, “Oh, Mr. Allen, I used to listen to you on a transistor radio when I was a little girl, under the covers so my parents couldn’t hear.” After she left, Hoss turned to Bob and said, “We had no idea we had that audience. We had all those thousands of kids listening to us.”

Don Williams’ release of “Good Ole Boys Like Me” was strong enough to reach #2 for three weeks, but didn’t quite manage to make the summit of Billboard’s country singles chart in the early summer of 1980. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

”I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry”
(written by Hank Williams)

B. J. Thomas (#8 pop, 1966)
Hank Williams (#43, 1966)
Charlie McCoy (#23, 1972)
Terry Bradshaw (#17, 1976)

There are times when men create art without ever realizing what they have done. In the case of songwriters, this art is the result of the fragile marriage of words and music. Once in a great while, out of that crystal-like union, comes a message that transcends all musical genres and springs directly into a listener’s soul. The song that results is timeless, its meaning just as strong in each successive generation. Using no gimmicks, no play on words, no sophisticated breakthroughs, the piece becomes a simple but profound testament for every man or woman who hears it. As years pass, it remains fresh and haunting. Because it transcends time itself, it’s as if the song is suspended in time just waiting to be discovered by each new generation.

Inspired by waves of emotion that no one seemed to fully understand, Hank Williams created art on several occasions. Using the tragic flavor of his own life, he wove simple words and unadorned music into songs that seemed to have endless layers of substance. He seemed to sense that he had a great deal to say, but very little time in which to say it. Mitch Miller, the noted band leader and long-time A & R director of Columbia Records in New York once observed: “No matter who you are, a country person or a sophisticate, the language of Hank Williams’ songwriting hits home. Nobody I have ever known could use basic English so effectively.” Much like Edgar Allan Poe, Hank Williams was seemingly possessed by forces which kept pulling him down into the depths of darkness and shadows. It was there, in the hopeless mire of booze and pills, where he sought refuge from demons only he saw and understood. Yet, like Poe, there were moments in Williams’ life when he pulled himself up into the sunshine. During these brilliant times, he shared the anguish of his other world in songs. His creations not only proved his genius, but often confirmed his fears.

In 1949, Hank composed a hopeless epic that was to become not just a country classic, but one of the most powerful and emotional songs ever written. No one knew what drove Williams to so eloquently describe the very essence of loneliness, but in simple language he nailed the void like no one ever had or probably ever will. This song, “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” was recorded at the second of only two sessions that Hank ever did outside of Nashville, at the Herzog Recording Studio in Cincinnati, Ohio on

August 30, 1949. Backing Hank that day were members of Red Foley's former band The Pleasant Valley Boys, consisting of Zeke Turner on lead guitar, Tommy Jackson on fiddle (who later went on to become a member of Nashville's renowned "A Team" group of musicians), Jerry Byrd on steel guitar and Louis Innis on rhythm guitar. Williams' breakthrough hit "Lovesick Blues" had also been recorded at the Herzog studio a few months earlier, on December 22, 1948.

"I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" is not one of the thirty-nine Hank Williams songs that appeared on the national playlists between 1947 and 1955. While rumor has it that it was the last song he ever sang (the movie "Your Cheatin' Heart" perpetuated this rumor, although in reality Hank's final song was Red Foley's "Midnight"), to country music fans of that generation, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" was an almost forgotten tune. Its magic, its autobiographical symbolism and beauty were all but lost, hidden behind the long list of Hank's hits that dominated the charts at the time. "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" was issued as a single, but it was relegated to the "B" side of "My Bucket's Got A Hole In It" which peaked at #2 on Billboard's country chart, ironically blocked from the top spot by "Lovesick Blues" which was continuing its lock on the number one position, holding it for a total of sixteen weeks.

Though picked up and performed by many country acts in the decade after Williams' death, "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" did not really gain a great deal of national notice until the song resurfaced as a vital part of the aforementioned 1964 movie "Your Cheatin' Heart," a largely-fictionalized account of Hank Williams' life, with MGM heartthrob George Hamilton portraying Hank (which by most accounts was generally regarded as a bad casting choice by the studio). Hank Williams, Jr. did the movie's soundtrack album but, at only 15, was much too young to play his dad in the film.

Two years later, an unknown Oklahoma-born pop singer recorded "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" in the same haunting manner as Hank had. This revived country classic would become the first chart hit for B. J. Thomas, who later would release major hits in the pop, country and gospel genres. The song's ride into the Top Ten of the pop charts via Thomas's record drew a reaction in Nashville. Going back into their vaults, MGM's technicians took Williams' old monaural acetate of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" from 1949, wiped clean the original instrumentation (keeping only Hank's voice), then added a new, modern soundtrack (complete with violins and background singers) and re-issued the song as a single. Although this revitalized version reached only #43 on the Billboard chart, it was deemed successful enough to spawn a four-album series of Hank's classic tunes, re-recorded with new tracks laced with strings. These albums were designed to demonstrate just how timeless Hank Williams' songs are. I liked them a lot but most country music purists overwhelmingly disapproved of the project, deciding that Hank's original recordings shouldn't be tampered with (quite similar to the controversy many years later surrounding the colorization of old black and white movies).

There is evidence to suggest that the song's original, working title was "I'm So Lonesome I Could Die" but that was rumored to have been changed by Fred Rose, Hank's mentor and head of Acuff-Rose Publishing, which handled Williams' catalog. Rose reportedly felt that the original title sent a message which was simply too hopeless. Maybe he was right, but the song's lyrics seemed to fit that first sentiment and Hank's life so very well. Either way, with "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," Williams had stepped beyond simple songwriting and created timeless art. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Your Cheatin' Heart"
(written by Hank Williams)

Hank Williams (#1 country, #25 pop, 1953)
Joni James (#2 pop, 1953)
Frankie Laine (#18 pop, 1953)
Ray Charles (#29 pop, 1962)

During the summer of 1952, less than six months before his death, Hank Williams was traveling by car with his fiancée Billie Jean Eshlimar to Louisiana to visit her family and inform them of the couple's engagement. As he drove through the wilted countryside and felt the rush of hot air blowing through the convertible, he switched off the radio and began to talk about his ex-wife, Audrey. For some time, country music's master songwriter rambled, telling the new woman in his life all about what he deemed Audrey's "wicked" ways. It became quickly obvious that she had hurt Hank more than even he could express, or so it seemed. The more he spoke, the more painful were the episodes he dredged up, becoming more bitter and somber with each remembrance. In an effort to sum up all of his frustrations, Hank finally sighed and said "her cheatin' heart will pay!"

That last phrase seemed to hang in the air for a few moments before Hank repeated it. He then asked Billie Jean to find a piece of paper and a pen. When she had secured both, Hank began to feed her words to the song that would become most associated with his monumental career. Billie Jean later recalled that "Your Cheatin' Heart" had been completed in less than ten minutes.

At this point in his life, Hank Williams was beginning to find a great deal of recognition beyond the often-confining borders of country music. His songs were being recorded by everyone from orchestras to the top pop singers of the day. He was being hailed as the "Stephen Foster of the Twentieth Century." Hank was no longer just a country bumpkin, he was a certified genius. Perhaps this is the reason why his manic mood swings, his alcohol and drug abuse, and his erratic stage performances were so easily overlooked and often dismissed. After all, he was Hank Williams. He was one-of-a-kind, his talent was as rare as gold, and he was to be forgiven every sin. Most assumed that his behavior was just the price that had to be paid for his unique and explosive talent.

On September 23, 1952, in what would prove to be his final session, Hank and his band gathered in Nashville's Tulane Hotel, home of the Castle Recording Studio, the city's only recording facility at the time. It was named after WSM Radio's slogan "The Air Castle of the South" because the studio had been established and operated by WSM technicians. Except for two earlier occasions at the Herzog Studio in Cincinnati, Hank did all of his recording at Castle, and everyone assumed that this would be just another routine session, like dozens of others. However, it soon became apparent that Hank was in even more frail condition than normal. The end was in sight. Here was a young man of twenty-nine dying of old age. Hank was used up, worn out and despondent. His skin tone was pale, his face wrinkled, his manner slow, his gait a bit unsteady. He had dark foreboding circles that lined his eyes and seemed to reflect a world full of black nights and dark days. Future RCA Victor producer and executive Chet Atkins played lead guitar on the session that day. In addition to "Your Cheatin' Heart," Hank had brought along several more new songs to record. One of those was called "I'll Never Get Out Of This World Alive" and Chet remembers thinking "buddy, that might not be too far wrong unless you straighten yourself out, if it isn't already too late." Also participating on that last session were Tommy Jackson on fiddle, Don Helms

(a former member of Hank's recently disbanded touring group "The Drifting Cowboys") on steel guitar, Jack Shook on rhythm guitar and Floyd "Lightnin'" Chance on bass. Two other standards were cut that day (and also went on to achieve #1 status): "Kaw-Liga" and "Take Theses Chains From My Heart."

The one remaining bright spot, if you could call it that, in Hank's life was documented in his recordings. Here was where the barely literate farm boy became the eloquent scribe. Here was where he stepped out of the gutter and walked soberly with the giants of music and poetry. Here was the one place where Hank momentarily seized immortality, and it was with a mournful wail that he gave his tortured words flight. Here was where he so eloquently shared with the world his pain and anguish, and just maybe it was because those simple words were so masterfully crafted that no one seemed to see a frightened and horribly lonely man reaching out for help.

Hank Williams died on January 1, 1953 and "Your Cheatin' Heart" was released six weeks later. It stayed on Billboard's country chart for 23 weeks and rested at #1 for six of those weeks. On the pop side, Hank's record topped out at #25. Pop singer Joni James covered "Your Cheatin' Heart" and rode it up the national pop playlists to #2, while Frankie Laine, who consistently covered country classics, jumped his version to #18. Since that time, hundreds of artists from all genres of music have scored with the song. Ray Charles had it on the pop and R & B charts in 1962, while Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis did rockabilly versions of it during that period of their respective careers. Today, "Your Cheatin' Heart" has even become the fodder for symphonies and "elevator" music. Yet, while hundreds have recorded "Your Cheatin' Heart," maybe the greatest testament to just how great Hank's version turned out on that autumn day in 1952, is the fact that no one has ever again charted with the song on the country side. In country music, "Your Cheatin' Heart" belongs only to Hank Williams.

"Your Cheatin' Heart" became so associated with Hank after his death that even the largely fictionalized 1964 movie biography about the singer/songwriter's career (starring George Hamilton as Hank) was given the song's title. While this act of Hollywood may have helped immortalize "Your Cheatin' Heart," it also probably cheapened it. The movie failed to even scratch the surface of the entertainer's talent and pain, and failed to really note what drove the singer to his early grave. Without a knowledge of Hank's anguish, the full impact of "Your Cheatin' Heart's" lyrics can never be appreciated.

More than 60 years after it was written, "Your Cheatin' Heart" is timeless. It would be difficult to find an American of any race or background who doesn't know at least a few of the song's words. Millions can sing every line. In its simple lyrics and tune is the essence of what every songwriter wants to create, but the price of this genius was simply too high. In his creative darkness, Hank Williams could see and poetically describe the most mystical of human emotions, but he was never able to discover a way to push back the darkest of nights and find the light. As it turned out, it was Hank's heart, not Audrey's, that really paid. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"San Antonio Rose"
(written by Bob Wills)

Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys (original instrumental version - #15 pop, 1939)
Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys (vocal version as "New San Antonio Rose" - #11 pop, 1940)
Bing Crosby (#7 pop, 1940)
Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys (re-release of "New San Antonio Rose" - #3 country, 1944)
Floyd Cramer (instrumental - #8 country, #8 pop, 1961)

Born in Kosse, Texas in 1905, future "King of Western Swing" and Country Music Hall of Fame member Jim Rob Wills was a product of a family that had played the fiddle for generations. Like most white boys from rural Texas, Jim Rob learned country and folk music at his father's feet, but it was in the cotton fields where the child absorbed a sound which would help his create a new American musical style. Young Wills worked side by side with blacks who sang blues and gospel as they toiled in the hot sun. It was this influence that reshaped a Southern boy's musical outlook. At night, when he sat on the porch and took up his bow, Jim Rob played old country standards, but he also added something new. He tried to combine the white and black sounds into a singular strain. It would be years in the making, but it was during these long Panhandle nights that the boy initially began working on the music the world would someday call "Western Swing."

Running away from home at fourteen, Jim Rob took any job he could find. During his travels he also stopped and listened to every band, both black and white, country and blues, rural and city. In Fort Worth he donned blackface and became a minstrel singer. At other times he fronted for medicine shows as a comic. As months grew into years, Wills would do almost anything to make a dime and entertain the crowd. By the early 1930s, Jim Rob had dropped his given names for Bob and replaced the comedy and stage makeup with his fiddle. On radio, first with the Wills Fiddle Band and later with the Light Crust Doughboys, Wills continued to evolve and build on the sounds that he had heard as a child.

As the Light Crust Doughboys' fame grew and they expanded their markets to include large, clear channel radio stations, so did their innovative new musical sound. As a probable outgrowth of his days in the cotton fields, Bob took a strong interest in black jazz. He tried to combine this urban musical style with the western sounds of rural Texas, and folks were responding. The group even cut a few sides for Victor Records in 1932. Then, just as success appeared to be on the horizon, Wills got drunk and missed an important radio broadcast. He was fired and was forced to start all over.

Migrating to Waco, Texas, Bob formed a new band he called the Texas Playboys, and continued to tinker with his new musical sound which at the time he called "western jazz." It was during this period that he put together the solid group of musicians who would help Wills develop his new trademark style. With the vocals of Tommy Duncan, the jazz piano of Al Stricklin, Johnnie Lee Wills' banjo, Kermit Whalen's steel and June Whalen's bass, Bob's sound was beginning to come together. Beginning in 1934, the band was the star attraction on 50,000 watt KVOO in Tulsa, Oklahoma. From this radio flagship, its signal blanketing most of the western half of the nation, the Texas Playboys grew to include more than twenty members and became the Southwest's definitive swing band.

Wills' composing and band-leading success could be traced to his free-wheeling style. He added instruments that no one considered hillbilly in order to enlarge the country/jazz sound. He was using

drums when no country band would even consider them. At a time when electrical instruments were deemed unfit for the Grand Ole Opry stage, Wills was featuring them in long solos. He even used brass. Surrounding himself with some of the era's most talented and creative musicians, he was generating and refining a country big-band sound that quickly became the mainstay of Texas dance halls during the pre-war years.

Beginning in 1935, Bob and the Playboys recorded sides that caught and preserved the dawn of this special sound. One of the first numbers they cut was a Wills original, "Spanish Two Step." This Tex-Mex dance tune combines the western and Spanish musical influences which were so much a part of the Southwest sound with a black/jazz flavor. In Texas and Oklahoma the release sold well, but just like the Wills records that followed, "Spanish Two Step" went nowhere on the national charts. It was evident that like so many other bands, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys were just a regional phenomenon. Wills was satisfied with this status. Both he and the group were making a nice living in the midst of some very hard times and they couldn't have asked for much more. None of them could have guessed that lightning was about to strike in the form of a re-worked old melody and a flower.

During a 1938 recording session in Dallas, the Playboys needed one additional tune to fill the time. Sitting down, Bob worked out a new instrumental by re-arranging "Spanish Two Step's" melody. As the band finished rehearsing the number, Art Satherly, head of Brunswick Records, asked Wills the tune's title. Shrugging his shoulders, Bob told the executive to name it himself. Satherly wrote "San Antonio Rose" on the master.

Released on the Vocalian label, "San Antonio Rose" became Wills' biggest hit up until that time. In 1939 the single climbed onto the national pop charts (country charts weren't established until 1944) and peaked at #15. The record's national play caught the attention of the Irving Berlin Music Company. Noting that the song was unpublished, they tracked Wills down in Tulsa and inquired about purchasing the sheet-music rights. On the phone, Wills agreed to write out the charts if Berlin would give him a $300 advance against royalties. Berlin sent an agent with the check to Oklahoma to pick up the charts and get Bob's signature on the contract.

"Where are the lyrics?" the music representative asked when Wills handed him the scores.

"Ain't none," Bob replied.

"You can't have the advance without the words," the agent shot back. "Mr. Berlin doesn't publish songs without lyrics."

Over the course of the next few hours, Bob, Tommy Duncan and an associate named Everett Stone sat down and tried to come up with a story for a song which they hadn't even titled. With the $300 check hanging in the balance, Wills finally came back to Berlin's emissary with a set of scribbled lyrics (he would later say the words were "two years in the making"). With the deal finalized, the parties went their separate ways and Wills soon began receiving regular royalty checks from the music and the recording.

In late 1940, the Playboys went back to Dallas to re-record the song with the new lyrics. In order to differentiate it from the instrumental, Okeh Records released the single as "New San Antonio Rose." This version proved to be Bob's biggest pop hit ever, topping out at #11. A few months later, Decca would record "New San Antonio Rose" with Bing Crosby supplying the vocal. Bing's record stayed on the

charts for eleven weeks, topping out at #7 for its high-water mark. Crosby's version did more than just make Wills money. It helped to legitimatize his form of country music in the pop world. During World War II, probably because so many soldiers (particularly from the Southwest) took country music with them as they were shipped around the world, Bob's version of "New San Antonio Rose" leapt up the new Billboard country chart in 1944, peaking at #3.

Over the course of time, Wills would come to be known as the "King of Western Swing," and his versions of "San Antonio Rose" would be eclipsed by other singles with more impressive chart showings. These included "New Spanish Two Step," a vocal version of the 1935 instrumental that Wills rewrote into "San Antonio Rose." Released in 1946, "New Spanish Two Step" slammed into the #1 position on Billboard's country chart (#20 on the pop chart) and maintained its hold at the top for sixteen weeks, making it the 14th biggest country hit of all time. Yet, even though five more Bob Wills singles would find their way to #1, none would come to mean as much to audiences as "San Antonio Rose."

There is no doubt that the song's instrumentation, beat and jazz-like feel shaped the way composers and musicians constructed their material for years afterward. Long after the big-band music had faded, the influence of Bob Wills could still be heard in several big-name performers, especially Ray Price. The 1970s saw a noted Texas swing group called "Asleep At The Wheel" that proudly carried on the Wills tradition. It would be difficult to imagine a country band presenting a salute to western swing and not play "San Antonio Rose."

Literally hundreds of performers have recorded "San Antonio Rose" since the Texas Playboys laid down their original tracks all those years ago. In 1961 Floyd Cramer took his piano treatment of the tune higher on Billboard's country chart than he did his own famous composition "Last Date." Yet, of all the different renditions of the song (including the half-dozen or so that Wills himself put on tape through the years), perhaps none can match the original for energy and enthusiasm. There is a passion in that 1938 record that expresses the essence of what Bob Wills wanted to create. Here was a sound that combined black blues and jazz with white western and hillbilly music and made it danceable. Here was where western swing found its quintessential vehicle, a truly inspirational creation. From Al Stricklin's jazzy piano riffs to Bob's kidding asides, it's hard to listen to that session and not smile. No wonder "San Antonio Rose" left such a lasting impression anchored so deep in country music's heart. – JH

The Story Behind The Song:

"Hello Walls"
(written by Willie Nelson)

Faron Young (#1 country, #12 pop, 1961)

When Willie Nelson arrived in Nashville in the early 1960s, many wondered if the singer/songwriter would fit in. Willie looked like he belonged. In those days, the young Texan wore his hair short, slick and precisely combed, dressed in nicely-pressed suits, complete with white shirts and thin ties. Yet, underneath this all-American cover was a man who was already a bit of a rebel. The independent nature that would someday make the man a major star was, at this time, evident only in his songwriting.

If anyone was a product of hard times, it was Willie. Born in Fort Worth, Nelson had grown up poor in the tiny town of Abbott, Texas. Raised principally by grandparents, Willie considered himself a farm boy, a child who liked the solitary loneliness found in cotton fields and along country roads. Yet, while living in a sparsely-populated area, he was drawn to the sounds of the city. Through the radio, Nelson came to know and love not only Ernest Tubb and Bob Wills, but the music of the big bands, tunes from Hollywood and Broadway shows, the jive of jazz ensembles, and the feel of black blues.

By his teens, Willie took his fascination with music a step farther. Learning a few chords on an old guitar, he began to sing and play at local events. It made little difference to Nelson if the group that needed him was a polka band, a hillbilly group or a blues quartet. He just wanted to perform. After a hitch in the Air Force, Willie drifted throughout Texas and eventually made his way up the West Coast in search of a place to play music. However, it was back in Texas, in Houston, where he finally began to make his mark in clubs and earned his first few dollars as a songwriter. Strapped for cash and with a family depending on him for support, Nelson sold one of his first compositions, "Family Bible," for $50. A year later the song became a national hit, making its new owner thousands of dollars in royalties. Meanwhile, Willie had almost nothing to show for it. Yet, this first best-seller did prove that he could write, so Nelson packed up and moved closer to the action.

Arriving in Nashville, Willie would spend much of his time at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge located adjacent to the Ryman Auditorium, home of the Grand Ole Opry. Tootsie's was the watering hole of choice for the lion's share of music industry people, and a lot of singers and songwriters hung out there. Hank Cochran, a writer for Pamper Music, first met Willie at Tootsie's during a "guitar pull," a ritual of sorts where songwriters would gather in a circle, pass around a guitar and play the latest songs they had written. When Hank heard Nelson's participation in the guitar pull, he thought this new guy had some of the best things he had ever heard. Cochran immediately introduced himself to Willie and asked him what company he was with. Nelson replied that he didn't write for anybody. He said nobody wanted him. Well, Cochran told Willie to come by Pamper Music the next morning and play some of his stuff for their talent guy Hal Smith. Nelson told Hank that in order for him to sign a songwriter's contract, he would have to be supplied with gas money so he could bring his wife and three kids up from Texas, and he would have to be guaranteed at least fifty dollars per week to live on. Smith informed Cochran that if they signed this new guy, Hank wouldn't get the pay raise that he had been hoping for (Cochran was making fifty dollars a week himself). Hank thought about it for a moment, then said "I'm getting by now, let's bring him in." So Cochran sacrificed his raise and got Willie a contract with Pamper Music. Sitting in the publishing house's main office, an old windowless garage, Nelson began to call upon his eclectic background and compose songs that had a much different feel and pace than anything else coming out of Music City at that time.

As was evident from the beginning, Willie was an artist more than he was a commercial writer. He didn't really write what he thought was going to sell, instead writing what he felt. When Nelson composed, he didn't rely on straight country chord patterns or tried-and-true lyric formulas. He would blend his country concepts with jazz, blues and even big band sounds. The results were often so different and so unique that it took a really good ear and sometimes a good imagination to determine the song's potential.

One of Willie's early Nashville efforts that no one wanted had been inspired by the room where he wrote it. One afternoon as he struggled to come up with ideas, Nelson began to think out loud. He would later tell his songwriting buddies how he came to write "Hello Walls," a song about a lonely man who had no one but an unfeeling house to share his heartache with. Willie merely looked up and said

“Hello walls,” which triggered the initial idea, so he went into the adjoining office to tell Cochran, his thought being that he and Hank might write the song together. Cochran determined the concept to be a little weird, but he said, “Okay, let’s do it.” Then Cochran unexpectedly got called out of the office for a phone call. By the time he got back, just ten minutes later, Willie had already written the whole thing!

Nelson pitched “Hello Walls” to every producer and record label in town, but got no takers. Most felt that it was just too quirky and almost comedic (even though it was supposed to be a serious song, not a novelty piece) and the industry brass simply thought that the seriousness of the message just wouldn’t get through to the audience. Depressed, Willie gathered with his friends down at Tootsie’s. He noticed that his buddy Faron Young was there and, needing money badly, he approached Faron with an offer to sell him “Hello Walls” outright for $400. Young wouldn’t buy the song, but he promised to record it later. Willie said he needed the money right now, so Faron gave him a $400 loan.

Young was in the midst of the hottest phase of his long career. A veteran of KWKH’s “Louisiana Hayride” program out of Shreveport, Faron had a smooth style that had first infatuated radio and record fans in 1953. In a span of eight years, the singer had produced thirty-five chart records and three number ones. His 1958 release of Roy Drusky’s “Alone With You” had spent thirteen weeks anchored atop the Billboard country chart. One of Nashville’s hardest-working stars, Young had spun off his good looks and easy charm and made several western movies. Yet, even as his star rose higher and higher, the singer never lost touch with his humble roots or his desire to help others. When he was in town, he was on the streets meeting the fans and spending time with new talent. Not long after Willie Nelson had arrived from Texas, he and Faron became fast-friends.

True to his word, in early 1961 Faron took Willie’s unique ode about a man so lonely that he talked to an empty room, into the studio. Young cut “Hello Walls” with a very personal approach. Though his voice was as smooth as it had been on his ballads, there was an almost spoken quality about his rhythm when he sang Nelson’s song. Faron’s arrangement therefore seems to draw the listener into the plight of this poor, lost soul. The quirky little song that no one wanted was about to become one of only six number one records for the entire year of 1961.

“Hello Walls” debuted on Billboard’s country single chart on March 20, 1961 and by May 8th had reached the summit, holding that position for nine weeks. Surprisingly, the record crossed over big on the pop playlists, peaking at #12, quite remarkable for a country record at the time. No one was more surprised about it than Nelson. Even before the royalty checks started rolling in, Willie found himself in high demand. The phone was ringing off the wall at Pamper Music from record executives wanting to know what other material this new, young scribe had. Several parody songs based on “Hello Walls” sprang up, the best known of these was by WSM Radio disc jockey Ralph Emery. His cut, called “Hello Fool,” turned out to be a big hit, climbing all the way to #4. It was Emery’s lone appearance on the charts. Within a year, Liberty Records offered Willie Nelson a record deal, and he was a regular guest on many of the nation’s best-known country music television shows of the day. Nelson scored just two top ten records for Liberty, the totally-forgotten “Willingly,” (a duet with Shirley Collie) and the only slightly better-remembered “Touch Me,” both in 1962. Although these releases did nothing to boost his notoriety, nor did his seven-year association with RCA Victor from 1965 to ’72, patience won out and eventually Willie found stardom as an artist thirteen years after signing his first recording contract. Faron Young’s huge hit “Hello Walls” (and later Patsy Cline’s “Crazy”) laid the foundation for Willie’s future success.

Not long after Nelson received his first very sizeable royalty check for "Hello Walls," the songwriter ran down Faron. Grinning from ear to ear, Willie handed the singer $400 in cash. When Young inquired what the money was for, Nelson reminded him of the loan. Faron laughed and told him, "You don't owe me a thing. If anybody owes anybody here, it's me that owes you." Many singers would soon owe Willie Nelson for their hits too. – JH

BONUS FEATURES:

"One Melody – Four Classics"

"I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes" (The Carter Family, #10 pop, 1929)
"The Great Speckled Bird" (Roy Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans, #10 pop, 1938)
"The Wild Side Of Life" (Hank Thompson and His Brazos Valley Boys, #1, 1952)
"It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" (Kitty Wells, #1, 1952)

The tie between American country music and traditional English folk songs is a deep one that goes back centuries. During the New World's first three hundred years, the American upper class may have continued to listen to the classical music of Europe, but the real pioneers were adapting and revising folk music to fit their situations and tell their stories. Many of the tunes that gave birth to what we now call country music were brought to the New World by men and women fleeing England's oppression. Music was one of their most powerful links to a faraway homeland. It was the fabric of what they had been, as well as being an oral history of their lives. After several generations of evolution, the instruments and words had dramatically changed. In many cases, there was only a faint hint of the original melodies left intact. Yet, by and large, there was a bit of the feel of the British peasant class in this "original" American music.

Country music legend A. P. Carter collected many of these ancient tunes and their new lyrics when he was looking for performance material for the Carter Family. "I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blues Eyes" was one of the hillbilly folk songs he uncovered. In 1929 it became a huge hit for the family. While this hauntingly sad story of a love that had been lost far across the sea was new to most of the listening public, the melody must have seemed familiar to many who had been raised around the English folk music tradition. The fact was that the musical riffs and strains had come across the Atlantic a couple of hundred years before Mr. Carter had collected the tune's Americanized verses. While "I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blues Eyes" might have been the first popular use of the tune, it was certainly not the only one. Sara Carter, A. P.'s wife, remembered hearing other versions of it when she was a child. Still, for the purposes of the recording world and country music history this early version, which climbed to #10 on the national pop music chart, was the initial popular use of the tune. As time would prove, it wouldn't be the last.

**** Transformation to "The Great Speckled Bird"** **

In early 1937, Roy Acuff was a former baseball player turned struggling medicine-show singer when he heard The Black Shirts use much different lyrics with the same English folk tune as "I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes." Acuff was captured by both this new song's message and symbolism. He paid singer Charlie Swain a very hard-earned fifty cents to transcribe the song's words. It was probably the best

half-dollar Roy ever spent. Within weeks, this new song "The Great Speckled Bird" would become Acuff and His Crazy Tennesseans' most requested number. He even sang it on his first Grand Ole Opry guest shot. Knowing very little about "The Great Speckled Bird's" origin, Roy began to dig into its history. Tracing the song's roots revealed that the religiously framed story had been composed by a minister named Guy Smith from Springfield, Missouri. Acuff also discovered that the song's unusual lyrics had been inspired by the twelfth chapter, ninth verse of the book of Jeremiah:

"Mine heritage is unto me as a speckled bird, the birds round about are against her; come ye, assemble all the beasts of the field, come to devour."

By October 1937, the American Record Company's William R. Calaway had also heard several different versions of "The Great Speckled Bird." It was both his and ARC's belief that this would be a great song in the hands of the right recording artist. Upon listening to Acuff's version, Calaway knew he had found that perfect match. Roy would later remember that he wasn't signed because of either his outstanding voice or great fiddle talent, instead the record label used him because they believed that he could deliver "The Great Speckled Bird."

Around the same time that Acuff recorded his first session, ARC was purchased by Columbia. During this period, the merged labels were unsure what to do with their hillbilly acts. Thus, Roy's recording of "The Great Speckled Bird" was held in limbo. Finally the company decided to record Acuff in early 1938 under its "Vocalion" banner. By this time, Roy had written four additional verses to go with the song's original six. In order to include all ten, the producer put the first five on side one and the other five on what was usually called the "B" side of the record. In retrospect, it was a very wise move. By the close of 1938, Acuff's first release had climbed to the #10 position on the national pop music chart (Billboard's country chart didn't come into existence until 1944), and Roy had been invited to become a member of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry. Roy Acuff's place in country music was thus assured, and his next release "Wabash Cannonball" would make him "The King of Country Music."

**** Transformation to "The Wild Side Of Life" ****

Two major national hits with the same tune was a phenomenal accomplishment, but the best days for the old English folk tune were still ahead. Over a decade after "The Great Speckled Bird" hit the charts, William Warren's wife of eight months left him. A few weeks later, Warren saw his now ex-wife dancing and drinking at a Texas honky-tonk. Devastated, he went home and immediately wrote lyrics about the event which he matched to the same tune used in "I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes" and "The Great Speckled Bird." Warren then gave the song to Jimmy Heath and the Melody Masters, a local group that played in the honky-tonk his ex-wife regularly visited. As soon as she heard the song, she immediately knew who wrote the lyrics and what inspired them.

The Melody Masters cut "The Wild Side Of Life" on a local label and placed it on area jukeboxes. Hank Thompson and his wife Dorothy heard it during one of Thompson's East Texas swings. Dorothy immediately like the song and hinted to Hank that he might want to consider recording it. However Hank was of the belief that the tune was worn out, that it had simply been used too many times before. Dorothy Thompson did manage to convince her husband to copy down the lyrics. In doing so he combined verses two and three, thus simplifying Warren's original story.

Hank Thompson was not a typical country music performer of the day. The Waco, Texas native had studied electrical engineering at Princeton University, and was using this background to create the

industry's first portable lighting and sound systems. He was also rewiring guitars and amplifiers to come up with far better concert sound quality. To say that he was innovative and constantly pushing the envelope was an understatement. Yet his developments in the technical area would eventually pale in comparison to his on-stage showmanship. Hank had first achieved national prominence in 1946 with "Humpty Dumpty Heart." A series of other top-ten hits had followed but by 1950, Hank Williams and Hank Snow's surges had left little room in the spotlight for the Texas Hank. By 1952, Thompson needed a hit just to re-launch his flagging career.

In the early part of the year, Hank and his band travelled west to cut a new series of records for Capitol. Ken Nelson, a producer assigned to work Thompson's Los Angeles recording session, asked Hank if he had anything for the "B" side of the singer's self-penned "Crying In The Deep Blue Sea." Thompson mentioned "The Wild Side Of Life." He pulled the scribbled lyrics out of his bag and, without a rehearsal, Hank and his Brazos Valley Boys cut it in one take. Then they packed up and went home.

The designated "hit" side "Crying In The Deep Blue Sea" could only manage to chart in the Southwest. Nationally, it went nowhere. After two frustrating months, a few disc jockeys began to turn the record over and play "The Wild Side Of Life." In one of the more bizarre events in recording history, without any public-relations push whatsoever, this "B" side moved like a tidal wave across the nation and became a huge hit. It reached #1 on Billboard's Country singles chart and remained there for fifteen straight weeks, making Hank Thompson's "The Wild Side Of Life" the seventeenth all-time biggest hit in country music history. Folk singer Burl Ives also landed near the top of the pop chart with his version of the tune. Three major hits in 23 years with the old English melody, but it still had more history yet to make.

**** Transformation to "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" ****

Songwriter J. D. Miller was driving along State Route 90 near Rayne, Louisiana when he heard "The Wild Side Of Life" come on the car radio. He immediately pulled off to the side of the road, grabbed a notepad and pencil and wrote a woman's response. He called his new song "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Even while Hank Thompson was continuing his hold on country's top spot on the charts, Miller submitted his lyrics to Decca Records. The label had no female country artists on its roster at that time, but a few of the company's associates were familiar with Kitty Wells. They knew she was married to Johnny Wright, half of the popular country duo "Johnnie & Jack," (spelling his given name a bit differently for the act) and that Kitty dabbled in music herself from time to time. In fact, she had recorded several sides for RCA Victor the previous year but they had all failed to chart. This disheartened her greatly, and she wasn't all that interested in trying again. Still Decca called her to come and record "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Kitty agreed, but only after her husband convinced her to do it if only for the session money, a very meager amount.

Decca liked Kitty's recording so much that they not only wanted to release it, but also sign her to a long-term contract. Some industry personnel questioned the label's actions. No female soloist had ever posted a major country music hit single. Except for Patsy Montana's pop hit of "I Want To Be A Cowboy's Sweetheart" in 1935, few female country-oriented songs had even bumped the charts. Country music, at that point in time, was strictly a man's world.

There was also another problem. When Wells heard Miller's new lyrics, she was shocked. Here we had a devoted mother, a pillar of the church, and a happily married woman who didn't drink or smoke getting ready to record a song about a woman being condemned to the sinful world of taverns and liquor by the actions of an unfaithful man. It was just the opposite of the image she had always tried to project. "It

Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" thus would have seemed totally inappropriate for Wells to promote. Still, in the face of opposition, Kitty and Decca forged ahead and in doing so, they changed the world.

Decca would have been satisfied to have simply charted on their initial time out with Wells. A top-ten song would have been cause for a huge celebration. What they got caught them by total surprise. With Kitty's mournful voice pleading "not to blame us women," "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels" became the first #1 single for a country music female artist. It would remain at that position for six weeks and reach #27 on the pop charts. Suddenly Kitty Wells was a major star. With an old melody and new revolutionary lyrics, country music's female liberation movement had begun. Kitty Wells was on the threshold of a career that would span hundreds of recordings and more than five decades of performances.

**** Summary ****

When taken by themselves, each of these four vocal versions of this old English folk tune was a remarkable piece of country music history. Each was a major hit, has been recorded and performed on numerous occasions by scores of artists, and has struck a special chord with fans. Yet the most remarkable record set by these four different lyrical renditions of the same tune is that all of the original recording artists have found their way to a special place on the hallowed walls of the Country Music Hall of Fame. The Carter Family probably would have made it even without "I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes," but Roy Acuff himself admitted that he was signed by the ARC label specifically to record "The Great Speckled Bird." Without the fifty cents he invested in the words to that song, he might have never become "The King of Country Music." Hank Thompson hadn't had a hit in three years when he cut "The Wild Side Of Life." Would he have ever had the opportunity to record his successive long string of hits without that song? Finally, Kitty Wells didn't even have a recording contract before "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels." Without that song, how many years would it have taken for the country music industry to recognize the power of female performers?

Four recordings, four sets of lyrics, four members of the Country Music Hall of Fame, and all with the same tune. That's a bit of history which is unlikely to ever be repeated, unless of course another songwriter comes up with another set of unforgettable words to this ancient British folk standard. But I would say it would be impossible for that to happen now in this modern world of meaningless, throwaway lyrics. The days of the great songs and the great songwriters are over. – JH

"The Anthem of Rockabilly"

"Blue Suede Shoes"
(written by Carl Perkins)

Carl Perkins (#1 country, #2 pop, #3 R & B, 1956)
Elvis Presley (#20 pop, 1956)

In the fall of 1955, Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley and others in the entourage of performers from Shreveport's "Louisiana Hayride" radio show were touring throughout the South. Also on the bill was

Carl Perkins. Cash, Presley and Perkins were all contracted to Sam Phillips' Sun Studio in Memphis and because of this association, plus the three performers' rockabilly-flavored style of music at the time (which the Hayride welcomed), many people erroneously connect Perkins to that show but he never was a part of the Shreveport broadcast.

Between shows, Cash reminisced about a man he had known while serving in the military in Germany, a black airman named C. V. White. Johnny thought it was interesting when White would refer to his military regulation airmen's shoes as "blue suede shoes," and Cash suggested to Perkins (who was always looking for song ideas) that he might try to write a song about those shoes. Carl replied that he didn't know anything about shoes. "How can I write a song about shoes?" he asked.

While Perkins played a dance on December 4, 1955, he noticed a couple dancing near the stage. Between songs, Carl heard a stern, forceful voice say, "Uh-uh, don't step on my suedes!" He looked down and noted that the guy was wearing blue suede shoes and one had a scuff mark. Carl thought, "Good gracious, he's dancing with a great-looking girl and all he can think about is his blue suede shoes."

That night Perkins began working on a song based on the incident. His first thought was to frame it in a children's nursery rhyme, "Little Jack Horner…." but quickly discarded that idea. Picking up his Les Paul guitar, be started with an A chord. After playing five chords while singing, "Well, it's one for the money…Two for the show…Three to get ready…Now go, cat, go!" he broke into a boogie rhythm. Carl grabbed a brown paper potato sack and jotted down the lyrics, writing the title out as "Blue Swade Shoes," (at the time, Perkins was unfamiliar with the correct spelling of "suede.")

Two weeks later, on December 19, 1955, Perkins was in Memphis, Tennessee at Sam Phillips' Sun Records studio recording "Blue Suede Shoes." The second take was selected for release. During the session, Phillips suggested that the line "go, cat, go" be changed to "go, man, go," but it wasn't. "Blue Suede Shoes" was issued on January 1, 1956. Two copies of the song on 78 rpm records were sent to Perkins, but arrived broken. Carl soon found out that the song was available using the new 7" micro-grooved 45 rpm technology, but was disappointed that he didn't have a copy in the original 78 rpm format.

In both Jackson, Tennessee (where Perkins lived) and in Memphis, radio stations were playing the flip side of the record, "Honey Don't," but in Cleveland, Ohio, prominent disc jockey Bill Randle was featuring "Blue Suede Shoes" as a leading element on his nightly broadcast and before January was over, the Cleveland distributor of the record telephoned Sam Phillips in Memphis requesting an additional 25,000 copies.

"Blue Suede Shoes" became the side of choice after that. It was especially big in Dallas, Texas, where music shops reported sales at a rate of 20,000 copies per day in that market alone. Perkins was booked for four consecutive weeks on the "Big D Jamboree," broadcast from the Dallas Sportatorium on 50,000 watt KRLD, and the show's four thousand seats were sold out for each of Perkins' performances. "Blue Suede Shoes" vaulted to #1 on Billboard's country charts, finished at #2 for a solid month on the Billboard Hot 100 pop chart (blocked from the top spot by Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel") and reached #3 on Billboard's rhythm & blues chart, the first non-R & B artist to place a record that high on that particular chart.

Recording cover versions of hit songs was standard practice in the 1940s and 1950s, and "Blue Suede Shoes" was one of the first tunes RCA Victor wanted their newly-signed performer, Elvis Presley, to

record. Presley's first RCA release, "Heartbreak Hotel," and Carl Perkins' "Blue Suede Shoes" rose on the national charts at roughly the same time. RCA, with its superior distribution and radio contacts, knew it could steal a hit record from Perkins and Sun Records. Elvis did give in to pressure from the label to record Perkins' song, but requested that his version be withheld as a single at least until his old friend's record ran its course. Elvis's rendition (featuring two guitar solos by Scotty Moore) appeared on Billboard's Hot 100 on April 7, 1956, but eventually reached a peak of only #20, certainly not a remarkable tally by Presley standards, which confirmed that "Blue Suede Shoes" still belonged to Carl Perkins.

Elvis Presley performed "Blue Suede Shoes" three times on national television in 1956. The first was February 11th on CBS-TV's "Stage Show." He performed it again on his third "Stage Show" appearance on March 17th, the same night that the song's originator, Carl Perkins, sang the song on ABC-TV's "Ozark Jubilee" from Springfield, Missouri. Less than a month later, on April 3rd, Presley performed "Blue Suede Shoes" again, this time on the "Milton Berle Show."

On July 1st, Steve Allen introduced Elvis on "The Steve Allen Show," and Presley, appearing in formal evening wear, stated, "I think I have on something tonight that's not quite right for evening wear." Allen asked, "What's that, Elvis?" "Blue suede shoes" was the answer, as he lifted his left foot to show the audience. Presley mentioned blue suede shoes a second time on this show. In a song during the "Range Roundup" comedy skit with Steve Allen, Andy Griffith and Imogene Coca, Elvis delivers the line, "I'm warnin' you galoots, don't step on my blue suede shoes!"

In 1960, Elvis recorded "Blue Suede Shoes" again for the soundtrack of his movie "G. I. Blues." This studio re-recording marked one of only a few times in Presley's career in which he agreed to re-record a previously-issued song. He did so on this occasion because the rest of the soundtrack was recorded in stereo, and thus a stereo version of "Blue Suede Shoes" was required. The 1960 version uses virtually the same arrangement as the 1956 recording and was included on the soundtrack album to "G. I. Blues," but was never released as a single in the United States.

In 1985, RCA issued a music video of Presley's first rendition of "Blue Suede Shoes." It featured actors in a contemporary setting (with Carl Perkins in a cameo appearance) and Elvis shown in archival footage. In 1986, Carl Perkins' original 1956 recording of "Blue Suede Shoes" was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. In 2006 it was selected by the National Recording Preservation Board for induction into the Library of Congress's "National Recording Registry," the highest honor a recording can achieve.

Less than a week after Perkins sang "Blue Suede Shoes" on the Ozark Jubilee in Springfield, Missouri on March 17, 1956, he was traveling to New York City by car to perform the song on NBC-TV's "Perry Como Show" when he and his band members were involved in a serious automobile accident. Both Carl and his brother Jay were critically injured (Jay never fully recovered and died just two years later). Carl did recover from his injuries but his career's momentum was virtually stopped in its tracks, and although he continued making records, Carl never was able to achieve that level of popularity again. For the remainder of his career he worked in the shadow of his legendary friends Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash (serving as a guitarist in Cash's road show for over ten years) and wrote some well-received songs, such as Johnny's six-week chart-topper "Daddy Sang Bass" in 1969. Perkins co-wrote (and played guitar on) the Judds' 1989 number one hit "Let Me Tell You About Love." A personal favorite of mine among Carl's compositions is "True Love Is Greater Than Friendship," which Arlene Harden took to #22 in 1971.

Looking back over his career, Perkins took his setback in stride, perhaps realizing that he never would have achieved superstar status even without the auto accident. When reflecting about his old friend Elvis Presley, Carl said, “He had everything. He had the looks, the moves, the manager (Colonel Tom Parker) and the talent. And he didn’t look like Mr. Ed like a lot of us did. Elvis was hitting them with sideburns, flashy clothes and no ring on the finger. I had a wife and three kids.”

Perkins published his autobiography “Go Cat Go” in 1996. Among Carl’s honors are his inductions into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Rockabilly Hall of Fame, the Memphis Music Hall of Fame and the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. In 2004, Rolling Stone Magazine ranked him #99 on its list of the 100 Greatest Artists of All Time. After three strokes, plus a battle with throat cancer, Carl Perkins died at Madison County Hospital in Jackson, Tennessee on January 19, 1998. He was just 65 years old. – JH

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