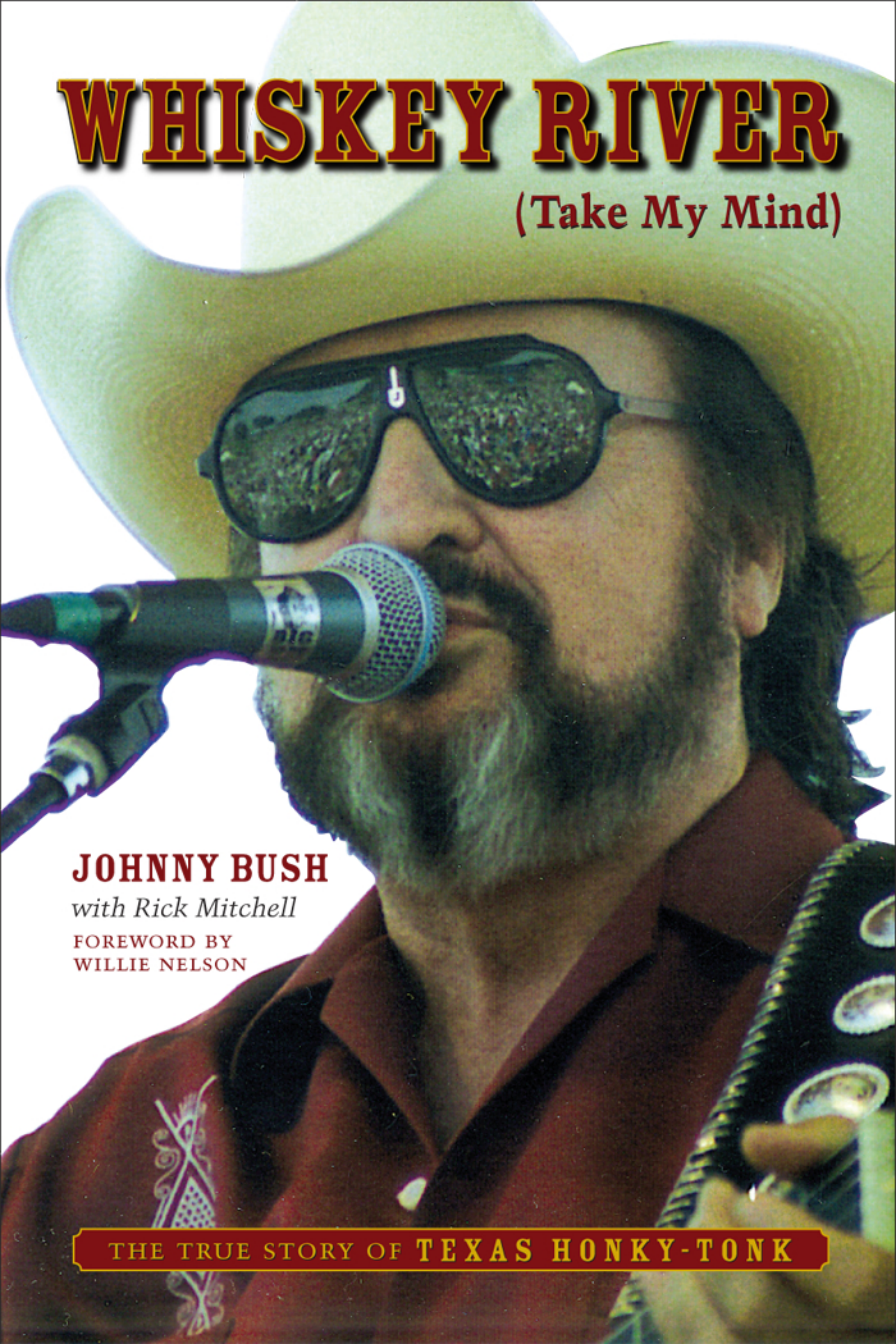
WHISKEY RIVER

(Take My Mind)



JOHNNY BUSH
with Rick Mitchell
FOREWORD BY
WILLIE NELSON

THE TRUE STORY OF **TEXAS HONKY-TONK**

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The True Story of

TEXAS HONKY-TONK

BY JOHNNY BUSH
WITH RICK MITCHELL

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Dedicated to
John Bush Shinn, Jr., my dad,
who encouraged me to follow my dreams.

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

By Willie Nelson

JOHNNY BUSH.

Good friend. Good drummer. Good singer. Good levitator.

Johnny Bush and I go way back, at least fifty years, to when I was a deejay at KBOP in Pleasanton, Texas, and playing clubs in and around San Antonio. I played in his band, and at one time I was also his personal manager. I was mostly a guitar player and John was the singer.

I remember we played a club in San Antonio called Al's Country Club. The owner later changed the name of the club to Mugwomp's. We asked him why he changed the name. He said, "The mugwomp is the meanest animal on the planet. It is like a huge dog with a head

on both ends." We asked him, "Well, how does it shit?" He said, "He don't. That's what makes him so mean."

Later on, Johnny played drums in my band. We called ourselves the Offenders. Then John started fronting my band, and Paul English played drums behind John until I came on, and Johnny went back and played drums. Then Johnny started recording on his own, and we started calling him "Winnie Mac Pigshit Bush," a name he still loves to this day.

And then Johnny wrote "Whiskey River." He has been exceedingly wealthy ever since. He doesn't need to sing anymore, or write books. He only does it to serve his public, which he deeply loves.

So, John, in the words of Dr. Ben Dorcy, "If you need a friend, buy a dog." And if there is anything that I can ever do for you, forget it.

Yours in country music,

Willie Nelson

P.S. Me and Texas and the rest of the world are very proud of Johnny Bush. Love forever, WN

P.P.S. Oh. About that levitation act. Apparently some stories cannot be told even in a tell-all book like this.

INTRODUCTION

Rick Mitchell

The Encyclopedia of Country Music, compiled by the Country Music Foundation in Nashville and published by Oxford University Press in 1998, has this description of Johnny Bush:

> With his early musical associations with both Willie Nelson and Ray Price, singer-songwriter John Bush Shinn III was a minor but significant figure in 1960s and 1970s Texas honky-tonk. Bush's most enduring claim to fame is the song "Whiskey River," which he wrote and had a Top Twenty country hit with in 1972.
>
> With a vocal style hauntingly—perhaps damningly—remi-

> niscent of Ray Price, Bush enjoyed minor chart success between 1969 and 1981 on Stop Records and RCA Records, as well as various independent labels. But his career was more than once hampered by a severe neurological condition that affected his voice . . .

The entry, written by veteran country music critic Bob Allen, goes on to mention Bush's early years playing nightclubs around Houston and San Antonio, his apprenticeships in nationally touring bands led by Nelson and Price, his Top 10 solo hits "Undo the Right" and "You Gave Me a Mountain," and Nelson's subsequent adoption of "Whiskey River" as an in-concert theme song. The brief entry concludes by noting Bush's 1998 "comeback" album, *Talk to My Heart*.

All true, and fair enough as far as it goes. So why is a "minor figure" in country music such as Johnny Bush writing his own book?

The first response to that question is for me to suggest that you read the book. As told in Bush's colorful—at times, *extremely* colorful—first-person narrative, the work provides its own best artistic justification. Bush proves himself to be as masterful at telling a story as he is at singing and songwriting.

Whiskey River (Take My Mind): The True Story of Texas Honky-Tonk is the story of the golden age of Texas country music in the 1950s and '60s—where that music came from and where it has gone. Bob Wills, Moon Mullican, and George Jones are part of this story. So are Charley Pride, George Strait, and Junior Brown. Over the course of the past half century, Johnny Bush has crossed paths with virtually everybody who is anybody in country music, and at some point they all turn up here, usually accompanied by a priceless anecdote or two.

The book is also an unflinchingly honest accounting of one man's life, the "kid from Kashmere Gardens with mud on his shoes," as Bush refers to himself. In fact, I can't recall another country autobiography—and I've read quite a few of them—in which the author has been so brutally honest, both in assessing his own personal shortcomings as well as in stating his professional opinion of what has become of the music to which he has devoted his life. Bush minces few words when discussing his disdain for mainstream contemporary country music, which in his view has gained the world only to lose its soul.

This is no smiley-faced Nashville whitewash job. *Whiskey River (Take My Mind): The True Story of Texas Honky-Tonk* is everything a

book about country music ought to be and almost never is. Bush's tale is equal parts funny and tragic, smart and stupid, happy and sad, sacred and profane.

Johnny Bush's stature within the tradition of Texas honky-tonk music cannot be accurately measured by an objective appraisal of his national chart successes. No, he is not a household name like his friends Ray Price and Willie Nelson. Nor is he Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, Hank Thompson, Lefty Frizzell, or George Jones, although he's known all of them and shared a bandstand with most of them in a career spanning more than fifty years.

But to those people everywhere who really know and love country music, Bush is *more* than a household name. He is a hero.

Back in the day, before media conglomerates and programming consultants gobbled up the dial in every major market in America, you didn't necessarily hear the identical radio playlist in Fort Worth and San Antonio that you did in Nashville and New York. Bush's records might have gone Top 10 or Top 20 nationally, but they went straight to No. 1 in every city and town in Texas, as well as in many other markets across the South and West.

Bush's late-sixties and early-seventies recordings brilliantly combined the influence of his two primary musical mentors, Nelson and Price. From the latter, he took the fiddle-'n'-steel sound and the two-step shuffle beat that remain, to this day, at the heart and soul of true Texas honky-tonk. From the former, he gained an appreciation for intelligent song craft. Nelson's lyrics on underrated classics such as "A Moment Isn't Very Long" and "Undo the Right," written a full decade before the Red-Headed Stranger became a pig-tailed national icon, brought a stoic, philosophical sophistication to a genre often derided, then and now, for its self-conscious reliance on corn-fed clichés.

When Price's career veered toward the middle of the road, abandoning the fiddle and the pedal steel for full studio orchestrations, Bush picked up the fallen torch for the Texas shuffle sound. By that time he was well on the way to developing his own unmistakable vocal style, similar to Price's but relying on a vibrato-laden upper register that earned him the honorary title of "the Country Caruso."

Cornell Hurd, now a mainstay of the Austin alternative-country scene, was the fledgling leader of a West Coast hippie-country band in the early seventies when he first encountered Johnny Bush's music:

Ray Price's sixties records were favorites with my band. Once I heard that big Texas shuffle—the fiddle, the steel guitar—I was hooked.

When Johnny's monster recording of "Whiskey River" hit the charts, it was absolutely amazing. It will always be amazing to me. In a world where country music had begun its long descent into "today's hot country," *here* was a record! It was a call to arms, like a SUPERCHARGED Ray Price record, with everything pushed to the firewall: more fiddles, a bigger beat, the epitome of hard-core, whiskey-drinkin', honky-tonk subject matter.

Johnny Bush's "Whiskey River" is still the ultimate whiskey-drinkin' Texas shuffle.

Bush's recordings and live performances had an even more immediate impact on musicians in his home state of Texas. Weyman McBride, a San Antonio native who later played lead guitar with Bush's Bandolero Band, recalls the first time he saw Bush playing live:

If you were in a band in Texas, you had to play quite a bit of Johnny Bush music because the crowd was going to demand it. The dance crowd loved it because it was fantastic Texas dance music, and the players loved it because the melodies were great, the playing was great, and anything John sang was always his song from that point on.

The musician that came to hear the Bandoleros for the first time was always a little shaken by the difference in the live performance. There was the dancing and the noise of the crowd, and the tempos seemed a little faster. But the biggest difference was the energy of the band. On the live shows, John would let the players take full solos. Some of the greatest musicians in the world play in country bands and you rarely notice it because many times the songs don't give them a chance to play. Johnny Bush gives them that chance. Maybe it's because John is a player himself, but whatever the reason, he always attracts good musicians to his bands and he lets them do what they love.

Between the Red River and the Rio Grande, Johnny Bush *was* a superstar and he *is* a legend, which is why—thirty years since his last

real national hit—he can still fill up a dance hall anywhere in the state, and why subsequent generations of Texas country artists, from George Strait to Pat Green, still genuflect to his legacy.

Whiskey River (Take My Mind): The True Story of Texas Honky-Tonk is Bush's passionate and insightful view of the musical tradition he's helped create, nurture, and sustain. He takes us into the rough-and-tumble honky-tonks where the music was born and bred. We travel with the author on the long bus rides between gigs, where boredom and loneliness were leavened by alcohol and drugs, not to mention the frequent company of friendly female fans. (Just in case anyone had any doubts, the relationship of the male musician to the female "groupie" long predates rock and roll.)

Those whose views of country musicians have been shaped by the sanctimonious image historically presented by the Grand Ole Opry, or by the hippie-versus-redneck sociology of the 1960s, may find themselves taken aback by the sheer debauchery that often characterized the honky-tonk lifestyle. Bush's generation of musicians—as well as many of those who came before them—could party as long and as hard as any of today's young rockers and rappers. Bush tells of one instance in the early sixties when every musician in the band was smoking reefer *except* Willie Nelson.

We get to know Willie pretty well in these pages. Those who've read Nelson's own autobiographies will see a different but no less intriguing portrait here. From their initial meeting as teenagers in San Antonio in the early 1950s to the time they spent together touring clubs in Texas in the 1960s and right up to the present, Nelson has served as a good friend, a supportive big brother, and an artistic mentor to Bush. It was Nelson who helped Bush land the gig playing drums with Ray Price. It was Nelson who financed and produced Bush's debut solo album. And it was Nelson who adopted Bush's "Whiskey River" as an in-concert theme song, subsequently recording it too many times to count, and providing Bush with a source of royalty income that helped him survive the lean years in the 1970s and '80s. If Bush is the often-insecure, all-too-human protagonist of this story, Nelson is the epic cowboy hero. If you have not already done so, read Willie's foreword to this book. Only men who know and love each other like brothers can talk to each other like that and get away with it.

In addition to the previously unexamined cultural history, there is also a significant amount of unpretentiously astute musicology in

this book. For example, Bush's analysis of the importance of the pedal steel guitar in country music is more penetrating than anything I've read by a music critic or a music scholar. This is a musician talking, a man who knows what it's like to be on the bandstand with the best steel guitarists who've ever lived. When Bush compares the crying sound of a pedal steel guitar to "the sound of a heartache, above the noise of happy people in that crowd," he's speaking as an artist, not as an observer.

For me, what is most remarkable about this account is how the development of the music so closely mirrors the events in Bush's personal life. Perhaps part of the reason he could sing so persuasively about drinkin' and cheatin', as well the oppressive sense of guilt that accompanied such behavior, is that he was singing about his own life. Bush's narrative proceeds along two parallel tracks—one personal and one professional—until the trains collide just at the point where he is on the verge of national superstardom.

In 1972, as RCA Records was set to release "Whiskey River," Bush experienced every singer's nightmare: he lost his voice. At first he was unable to sustain the high notes onstage. The problem worsened until he could hardly speak, although he never completely lost the ability to sing. After years of misdiagnosis, Bush's condition was finally identified as spasmodic dysphonia, a neurological disorder that affects an estimated one out of 35,000 people. With the help of operatic vocal exercises, Bush eventually regained his ability to sing well. He estimates that he now operates at about 75 to 80 percent of where he was in his prime, which is good enough to put any ordinary singer to shame.

Understandably, Bush has pondered what might have been had he not lost his voice at such in an inopportune time. The late Tommy Hill, a respected Nashville insider who produced many of Bush's recordings from the sixties through the nineties, had no doubts. "If Johnny Bush had not had a voice problem, he would have been one of the heaviest artists in the business today," Hill told me in 1997. "Put his version of 'You Gave Me a Mountain' against Marty Robbins's or Frankie Laine's. Nobody had more tonal control and perfect pitch than Bush had. That's just my opinion, but I think I know country music."

When I met Johnny Bush in 1989, he was unable to carry on a simple phone conversation. When we began working on this book, in 1999, he still had great difficulty maintaining a regular conversational

flow. Our taping sessions were at times excruciating, and transcribing the tapes was not easy, which is part of the reason the book took so long to finish.

For decades Bush was convinced that God was punishing him for his sins. However, there is a happy ending to this story. He has renewed his faith in God. He is finally married to the right woman. He's cutting good albums again. And thanks to a revolutionary treatment in which minute amounts of Botox are injected directly into the muscle around the vocal cords, Johnny has regained his ability to speak naturally. The downside to this treatment is that he must speak and sing in a lower key. He now sounds more like Johnny Cash than Enrico Caruso. But, hey, it didn't hurt Cash's career, and Bush's recent acoustic album, *Devil's Disciple*, might open a door to a new audience, as did Cash's unplugged recordings in the twilight of his career.

It is the clandestine conceit of this book that the two stories told here are really one. Johnny Bush's autobiography *is* the true story of Texas honky-tonk, which is why this book needed to be written. From his hardscrabble upbringing in Houston and teenage years working in the Gulf Coast oil patch to his recent induction into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame along with his first hero, the late Lefty Frizzell, Bush has led a life exemplifying the joy and pain of a glorious and timeless art form that deserves more critical respect and academic interest than it has yet to receive.

Some of the things Bush did, some of the things he says, and some of the ways he says them, may offend some readers. But to quote Tom T. Hall's song "Old Jethro":

> Now some will condemn me for writing
> A song about a man and his wife
> But a man can't write unless he relates all the things that he sees in his life
> Now some will condemn me for cursing
> But much can be said for this girl
> Who gave her heart to old Jethro
> And her body to the whole damn world.

And as long as the Whiskey River don't run dry in Texas, you can bet there will be some lost soul to plunk a quarter in the jukebox and punch up an old record by Johnny Bush.

Whiskey river, take my mind
Don't let her memory torture me
Whiskey river, don't run dry
You're all I've got, take care of me.

RICK MITCHELL is the former popular-music critic at the *Houston Chronicle* and the author of *Garth Brooks: One of a Kind, Workin' on a Full House* (1993). He has been writing about all types of music for more than thirty years. He is also the producer of Johnny Bush's latest album, *Kashmere Gardens Mud: A Tribute to Houston's Country Soul*, released on Houston's Icehouse Music label (March 2007). He lives in Houston, Texas, with his wife and daughter.

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PROLOGUE

It was the summer of 1972. I was booked at Dance Town, USA in Houston, Texas—the largest dance-hall venue in the Southwest and a place where I'd enjoyed great success in previous appearances.

The show was sold out. Both parking lots were full, and cars were lined up down the block on both sides of Airline Drive.

"Whiskey River," my first release on RCA Records, was the No. 1 record in Houston and all across Texas. It looked to be the biggest hit I'd ever had.

I'd previously enjoyed a successful five-year recording career with such hits as "What a Way to Live," Undo the Right," "You Gave Me a Mountain," "My Cup Runneth Over," and "I'll Be There." Most of

these songs had reached No. 1 in the Texas market and gone Top 10 or Top 20 nationally.

In 1969, I'd been voted the Most Promising Male Vocalist in country music by *Record World* magazine—the equivalent to today's Country Music Association Horizon Award. Bob Claypool, the music critic at the *Houston Post*, had proclaimed me "the Country Caruso."

This rising star, a hometown boy made good, was the one the crowd had come to see and hear perform. I loved playing to the Houston crowd. This was special. This was home, the city where I'd been born and raised.

The familiar preshow adrenaline rush began. But on this night it was different. This wasn't the natural high of anticipation and excitement I usually welcomed before a performance.

What I felt on this night was *fear*.

A few months earlier, during a performance in South Texas, something strange had happened. I began to experience a tightness in my voice. The high notes—which in the past had come as easily and naturally to me as breathing—became raspy and strangled. It was if my throat was being choked off.

It came on without warning. After examining my larynx, the doctors had told me that they could find nothing wrong with my vocal cords. They had suggested that the problem lay elsewhere, that I was suffering from stress and fatigue brought on by my heavy work schedule.

True, I was tired. In one year I had toured from Florida to California, in addition to appearing regularly on the Texas dance-hall circuit, where I was one of the top-drawing acts.

I was also experiencing problems in my marriage, which were contributing to the stress.

One doctor suggested that I take some time to rest my voice and straighten out my personal life. He wrote me a prescription for Valium, and lots of it.

But I couldn't do that just as my career was on the verge of lifting off to the next level. I needed to keep performing and to stay in the public eye to promote my new record.

I tap-danced my way through the performance. The crowd loved it, but I didn't. I knew I was not at my best. When I'd go to hit the high notes, my voice would choke off and I would have to compensate by controlling my breath and not pushing it to the limit the way I was used to doing.

I kept hoping that whatever this condition was, it would disappear as suddenly as it had come on. But it didn't.

WHISKEY RIVER (TAKE MY MIND)

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1

I LOVE YOU SO MUCH IT HURTS

I love you so much it hurts me
And there's nothing I can do
I'm so afraid to go to bed at night
Afraid of losing you.

—"I LOVE YOU SO MUCH IT HURTS," WRITTEN AND RECORDED BY FLOYD TILLMAN

I WAS BORN JOHN BUSH SHINN III on February 17, 1935, in Houston, Texas.

My earliest memory would be the time my brother was born. My mother tells me I'm crazy, because I'm only seventeen months older than he is, but I remember going to see her in the hospital when he was delivered.

I just have one brother. He's a Baptist minister. So he represents one side, I represent the other, at least according to our family joke.

I loved my parents, and they loved each other, for a while. My daddy was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. He and his daddy were in the printing business, and they migrated south to Oklahoma City, then from Oklahoma City to Houston. My mom, as far as we can trace her back, is from East Texas, Montgomery County. Her side of the family was all sharecroppers or loggers in the Big Thicket in East Texas. Her daddy was a carpenter, a blacksmith, and a sharecropper. When World War II came along, he went to work in the shipyards.

My dad was older than my mom. Not by much, five or six years is all. But my mom called the shots. It was always "Ask your mother," "Whatever your mother said." Come to find out years later, Mama needed a man to tell her what to do, not the other way around. Perhaps that's why it didn't work after a while.

Music has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Every day at noon the Texas Network would air live music. We would be able to get KVOO from Tulsa sometimes. This was late thirties. Bob Wills was advertising what they called Hillbilly Flour. On the back of every flour sack was a printed doll that you could cut out and stuff. I had one of those dolls that my mother made for me.

Once when I was about four or five years old, one of my uncles took me for a ride on his motorcycle. I was barefooted, had on short pants. We rode out Washington Avenue, which then was known as the San Antonio Highway. We rode out to the old 40/40 Club, where my aunt Adele was a carhop and waitress and my uncle Jerry Jericho sang and entertained. My uncles were talking and I was standing on the dance floor in my bare feet when "Steel Guitar Rag" started playing on the jukebox. The sound coming from those big Wurlitzer speakers seemed to reverberate through the floor, up through my body, and through my chest. It was frightening, an almost a spiritual feeling I had never experienced before. I can't explain in words how exciting and beautiful that sound was, and still is.

My mother would sing to me when she was rocking me to sleep. She sang so bad I would pretend I was asleep. I tell it as a joke now, but it's partially a joke and partially true. My dad played guitar, and people would come to the house and bring their guitars and they would play. While the other kids were outside, I'd sit around and listen and watch how my dad held his fingers on the strings. Then I'd go find a guitar and try to remember where my dad put his fingers to make chords.

For one reason or another my family moved to Oklahoma City for a while when I was about four or five years old. To show you how be-

hind we were, we moved back to Oklahoma just at the time everyone else was leaving because of the Dust Bowl. At a picnic one night, my daddy stood me on the table, and I sang "Beautiful Texas" to all them Okies. That was my first performance. I'll never forget that, because the crowd response was good. I thought, "Hey, this is all right!"

When we got back to Texas, we lived for several years in an area of northeast Houston called Kashmere Gardens. Kashmere Gardens was bordered by Jensen Drive to the west, Lockwood to the east, Liberty Road to the south, and Kelly Street, which is now the 610 freeway, to the north. To the northwest there was a packing plant. Just south of that was the old Crustene lard mill. When the north wind would blow, we'd get that smell. The Champion paper mill was to the southeast. So in the summertime when we would get the prevailing southeasterly breeze off the gulf, like Houston does, we had *that* smell, which smells like burnt cabbage. Those smells are forever embedded in my memory.

In Kashmere Gardens most of the streets were paved in oyster shell that they dredged up out of Galveston Bay. We'd play softball in the streets down there, and we'd run up and down them shell streets barefooted without cutting ourselves. Our feet were tough. In the summertime, cars would drive over those same streets, and this light gray dust would just coat everything. There were times when my mother would have to rewash the clothes out on the line because that dust would settle on them.

Whenever it rained, the lots would turn to mud. We would get all dressed up to go and have to walk out across our front yard with no sidewalk. It would be muddy. Jump the ditch onto the street with that old shell, walk to the corner, and wait for the bus.

That Kashmere Gardens mud is something I hated. We would go to functions and banquets with my dad, as a family, and people's shoes would be so clean and shiny. I looked down at mine and put them under the table 'cause they always had mud on the heel. I didn't like the mud on my shoes, and to this day, I still don't.

The house we lived in didn't have electricity, nor did it have plumbing of any kind. Everyone in Kashmere Gardens had outhouses; nobody had indoor plumbing. We had kerosene lamps. No air-conditioning, of course; we didn't even have a fan. In the summertime the air was like a hot, wet blanket. We'd go to the movies, and it would be air-conditioned, refrigerated air. We couldn't believe it. Whoever brought air-conditioning to Houston deserves a monument.

For years, the house wasn't sealed. You could look up and see the

The Shinn family, circa 1940: Bush Shinn, left, *with his brother, Gene, and their parents, Ruby Lee and John Shinn. (Photos are from Johnny Bush's personal collection unless otherwise indicated.)*

shingles. It was just a shell of a house for a long time. Wind seemed to blow right through it. We had a well. We had to go out and pump the bucket and bring it in the house. Everybody drank out of the dipper. It was a shallow well because my grandfather and my uncle had dug it by hand. The outhouse was maybe twenty-five or thirty feet from the well. Can you imagine those conditions today? But we never got sick.

Nothing ever bothered my daddy. He had a saying: "I tried to worry once, but I couldn't keep my mind on it."

He taught me a little song when I was a little boy. He said my Grandpa Shinn, his daddy, taught it to him: "Nothing ever worries me / Nothing ever hurries me / Good things come to those who wait / Slow but sure is the easy gait / Let the foolish people weep and sigh / I'll take the good things as they come by / For what's to be is gonna be / So nothing ever worries me."

I WAS A WORRIER, though. I didn't know why.

I had friends and fun in the neighborhood. But something was driving me, and I didn't know what. I didn't complain. I just knew that there had to be a better way.

We went to church. That was part of my problem, because I was a very sensitive young lad. When I was a little boy, anything an adult told me would be the truth as far as I was concerned. My grandmother,

my mother's mother, kept us a lot. She'd say, "OK, you've been a bad boy today. Tonight, when you're asleep, the Devil's gonna come and get you." I would be so terrified that I wouldn't sleep all night. It sounds silly to say something like that today, being a grown man, but I can still feel that fear sometimes. I vowed that if I ever had children and grandchildren, the bogey man would never be brought up. And if they ever needed correcting, they would be corrected in a manner that didn't scare the hell out of them.

My mom was a strong woman. She made our clothes by hand. Back in those days, you could buy white cotton feed sacks. Some of them were printed with different patterns and colors. And she would get these sacks and make our shirts to wear to school. Everybody in that area did the same thing. The only thing we bought was pants, and we each got one pair of shoes.

She would hand-wash our clothes outside. She would boil the clothes, hang 'em up on the line, and after they dried, sprinkle 'em, and she'd hand-iron everything. Every day we had starched and ironed clean clothes to wear. I was always proud of her for that. She worked hard. She was a stickler for cleanliness. Of course, you could clean that house and you couldn't tell it.

Very seldom did I hear any curse words, but we got our butts beat quite often, more by Mom than Dad. Dad had a way of working on you psychologically. He'd say, "There's a guy over in Germany that acts just like you."

There was hugging and kissing, but I never heard the words "I love you" from my dad or from my mom until way after I was grown. Texas during the Depression was a way of life where nobody was openly affectionate to anyone. The idea of "getting in touch with your feelings" would have been considered sissified, a sign of weakness.

There was a Baptist church on the corner. For some reason, preachers back then—even some today—put a guilt trip on everybody. I remember thinking we were all going to Hell, according to our preacher. Makeup was a sin. Women wearing shorts was a sin. Dancing was just an out-and-out "You're going straight to Hell. Do not pass go, do not collect $200."

Years later I had a doctor tell me that musicians, poets, and songwriters are very sensitive people. At that young age—nine or ten—I remember having the hell scared out of me so bad so many times I began to have what are known today as panic attacks. And it was because of things I'd hear in the church in those days and things I'd hear adults say: that the world was coming to an end. I just couldn't fathom that. I

really had problems with it, to the point where I'd break out in hives when I should have been having a good time. I'd be afraid to go spend the night at a friend's house, afraid the world was gonna come to an end and I wouldn't be with Mom and Dad. A kid shouldn't even be thinking about things like that.

My favorite escape was the movies, and not just because of the air-conditioning. Every chance I got to go to the picture show, whether I'd already seen the movie or not, I would go. Every Saturday, I got to hear Gene Autry or Roy Rogers at the old Queen Theater on Jensen Drive. I always liked them better than Charles Starrett or Hopalong Cassidy because Gene and Roy sang. Singing cowboys must have caught on, because guys like Charles Starrett started having Bob Wills and Ernest Tubb in their own movies, for the music.

At the old Queen Theater, that's where I began to realize we were different. I could see there was another way of life besides the way we lived. Movies showed me the world outside Kashmere Gardens. But then the outside world came crashing in.

When World War II began to come on strong, my uncles were all drafted. My dad didn't have to go. He got a deferment because of his job, but he did join the National Guard. He had to go to drill once a week, wear a uniform and everything.

On weekends my daddy would have to report to the National Guard armory to drill, shoot, and train to be a soldier. The armory was over by San Jacinto High School, in what is now considered midtown in Houston. Back then, that was considered a ritzy section of town. The streets were paved, with sidewalks and carpet grass. And the men's shoes would be shined. I didn't see that Kashmere Gardens mud caked on their shoes or on the bottom of their pants cuffs.

So I began to see that there was a better way. The trick was, how to get out?

I ALWAYS LOVED MUSIC and hearing my favorite songs on the radio and on the jukebox. Some of my favorites were by guys that lived in Houston. Floyd Tillman's "Each Night at Nine" and "Slippin' Around" and "I Love You So Much It Hurts." Ted Daffan's "Truck Driver's Blues." I was around when they were writing those songs and recording them and playing them on the air with Pappy Selph's Blue Ridge Playboys. It used to be no big deal to go over to where those guys lived and talk to them. I realize now, it *was* a big deal.

We didn't have electricity, so we didn't have a radio. But other people in the neighborhood had electricity. Everybody's windows were open in the summertime. As we would play through the neighborhood, I would hear music coming out of somebody's house over the radio. I'd lay down in a ditch and listen to those programs.

Still the King: Bob Wills (wearing the white hat and holding the fiddle) and the Texas Playboys. Photo courtesy of Rosetta Wills.

*Ben Christian (*second from left*) and his Texas Cowboys, featuring Jerry Jericho (*fourth from left*), circa 1947.*

Ted Daffan, Houston songwriter ("Truck Driver's Blues," "Born to Lose"), circa 1950.

Of course everybody in Texas at that time was trying to sound like Bob Wills. He was the biggest star of his day. Just huge. Everybody knew who he was, like they do with George Strait now.

I had an uncle named Smilin' Jerry Jericho. He was married to my mother's sister. He sang with a Houston band called Ben Christian and the Texas Cowboys until he was drafted and went into the Army.

When he came out, I was ten or eleven years old and had learned a few chords on the guitar. My dad had bought me a little three-quarter-sized guitar. That was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen in my life. I have never been more proud of a guitar since. My dad taught me some chords, and I picked up what I could on my own. I'd play at school and play at the house. I got hooked on that. Even today I've got a guitar sitting out of the case in every room of my house. A lot of times I can think and

concentrate a lot better with a guitar in my hand, pickin'. It's always been that way. It has a tranquilizing effect on me.

My dad finally got a car. It was a Franklin, probably a 1931 or a '32 model. First one I'd ever seen, and I've never seen another one since. It looked like something out of the Al Capone era. Great big wooden-spoke wheels. It had fender wells where the spare tires would go. The engine was air cooled; it had no radiator. It had a canvas top like a convertible, but it didn't have windows for some reason. When it was new, it must have been a pretty expensive automobile. I don't know what he paid for it.

My mother was ashamed to ride in it. I thought it was great! The car had a radio, and when Dad came home from work, I'd run out there and listen to my programs, 'cause we didn't have a radio in the house. *Superman*, *Terry and the Pirates*, *Lum and Abner*—these little fifteen-minute shows that used to be on radio back in those days. I loved those radio programs.

I WAS IN FIRST GRADE when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I remember coming into my grandfather's house in San Antonio and my grandpa sittin' by the radio, and he looked mad. Every other word that come out of my grandfather's mouth was a cuss word. He was loud, rough, and gruff. I loved him, but I was also deathly afraid of him. Now, I often catch myself talking just like he did.

I remember him saying, "Dirty son of a bitches! Dirty rotten son of a bitches!" I said, "What's happening?" And he said, "Japanese just bombed Pearl Harbor."

My two aunts were going with two soldiers who were stationed at Fort Sam Houston, and their leaves were immediately cancelled after the attack. We had to drive Uncle Tommy and Uncle Dick back to Fort Sam outside of San Antonio. Two days after that they got married to my aunts. That was the last time I saw Tommy. He was killed in Italy.

Every day at school we'd make "Buy War Bonds" posters. I remember the bomb being dropped on Hiroshima. I remember my dad commenting that it had taken three days for the dust to settle to find out the damage.

That was the beginning of the age of atomic power. And everybody was as afraid of it as they were when electricity was invented: "It's the work of the devil. We don't want it in our house," you know? "Sign of the end of the world. The world's going to blow up." Scare

tactics ran pretty rampant through the neighborhoods, especially in the churches. "This is it. Any day now the world could end . . ." And that would just scare the living hell out of me.

My little brother, Gene, was kind of a big-hearted guy. Where we went to school, with the poor people, we were all in the same boat. Nobody wore shoes back in those days. You went to school barefooted until the weather got cold. And we wore striped overalls and the shirts my mama would make for us out of feed sacks.

But some were more unfortunate than we were. Some of them didn't have lunches. In those days, there was no free-lunch program. If you didn't bring your lunch, you could buy it. If you didn't bring it and you couldn't buy it, there was a little section for you to sit. They asked the rest of us if there was something on our trays we didn't want or if we had an extra sandwich or an apple, to turn it in over here and they would give it to a student who had nothing.

So Gene went to this counter and turned in his sandwich that he didn't want. He said, "I would like to give this to the poor kids."

There wasn't nobody poorer than we were! He had taken a bite out of it, but he thought nothing about that. Half a sandwich was better than none, the way he looked at it. And they scolded him for it. Hurt his feelings. We still laugh about that to this day. He was standing there, barefooted, had his overalls rolled up halfway to his knees, saying "I want to give this to the poor kids." In his mind, he wasn't poor.

Now I tell my grandkids we were so poor we spelled it with five *o*'s: *pooooor*.

I liked school just fine until my uncle Leroy told me I wasn't supposed to. Leroy was my mother's brother. He was just two and a half years older than I was, more of a brother to me than an uncle. And he was my hero. You know two and a half years to a kid is a lot of difference in age. He was my protector and my mentor. If he said I was not supposed to like school, that was it for me.

I did pretty well in school when I put my mind to it. But my mind was always on something else. I hated to sit at the desk. A lot of the subjects just didn't get my attention. I would rather look out the window and daydream. Many was the time when I'd be called on to answer a question and I'd have no idea what the subject was because I hadn't been listening. I'd be a good student today. I hated to read back then, and I love to read now.

I was always pretty popular, but more with the girls than with the

guys. I was average sized. I took care of myself. Lots of fights. 'Course if I had a problem with one of the bigger guys, Leroy took care of that.

I have always been fascinated by the women. When I was about ten or eleven I began to notice this little blonde in the neighborhood named Marita Pipkin. We all went to the same school. In the summertime she would go to the grocery store. There was a little store called Hearn's Grocery, and we traded there on credit. We bought our kerosene there for our lamps, and our food. On payday you'd settle up, which took all of your money, so you started out the next week on credit again.

There was two ways she could go. The shortest way was to bypass our house. But for some reason she would come down the street and make a left turn in front of our house. I always knew about what time she was coming, so I would put some water on my hair and comb my hair and look as nice as I could and get out my guitar and sit on the front porch. And I'd be singing "Sioux City Sue" or a popular song of the day. And she'd walk by and just thrill me to death. We'd never make eye contact. I knew why she came by there, and she knew why she came by there, and it might have been love at first sight if we'd just looked at each other.

My hero, my uncle Leroy, told me, "You're not supposed to like girls, man." I could go along with him on not liking school, but I couldn't go along with him on that one. I liked her a lot, settin' on the porch with my guitar, singin' as she came by. She got a thrill, so did I.

I was twelve years old when I had my first date. This girl was in my class. Her name was Ann. She lived halfway between where we lived and Kashmere Gardens Elementary. I walked all the way over to pick her up, walked to the bus stop where she lived, got on the bus, went to the Queen Theater, paid for her ticket, sat by her, had my arm around her. Fifth grade. I probably wasn't quite twelve. Got on the bus, went to her house, then I walked all the way home.

Boy, did I catch hell from the guys.

"What are you doing? You crazy? What is this? Let's get our BB guns, go out in the woods and shoot some birds."

"No. I'm going to the show with Ann."

"You're crazy."

I WAS IN THE SEVENTH GRADE when my parents got divorced. It's a funny thing. I have this sixth sense, whatever you want to call it. I knew something was wrong and my dad didn't. We went to a Fourth

of July reunion in 1946 or '47, and my mom met this guy who had just been discharged from the army. He was a young good-looking guy. My dad called him son. His name was Edward, but everybody called him son. My dad said, "Son, come on down to Houston and stay with us and find you a job."

By that time we'd left Kashmere Gardens and my dad bought a house in Pineview, which is off Harrisburg Boulevard on Houston's east side. Compared to what we were used to, it was a mansion. It had three bedrooms, a screened-in porch, polished hardwood floors. It had a commode and a bathtub. It had a sink. My mother was so proud. The lawn had carpet grass, and we had sidewalks. It was just great. We just loved it.

So this guy Edward come down to stay with us and look for a job. My dad was working the night shift at that time. One night my mom said, "Come on boys, we're going to the movies." I thought, "On a school night? Is something wrong with her?"

We had to walk about a half a mile to Harrisburg Boulevard to the bus stop. And I noticed as we walked to the bus stop that they were arm in arm, holding hands. My little inner voice, the one that's been with me forever, said, "Bush, something's wrong here." She never walked with my daddy arm in arm, and they didn't go to a show on a weeknight. Especially on a school night!

Around this time I had begun to go out to my uncle Jerry Jericho's house, and I would stay with him on weekends. He was a big hometown star back in those days. He was on Four Star Records. On Sunday nights I'd have to make that long walk back from the bus stop on Harrisburg Boulevard to our house.

I was almost home one night, and as I rounded the bend to where I could see our house, my dad started running toward me, and he was crying. It scared me to death. I'd never seen any emotion from my dad like that. He said, "Son, your mama has told me she wants a divorce. She wants me to leave."

I'm twelve years old. I was in shock, because Mom and Dad were my safe island of refuge. I was protected. I felt loved. I've never felt that security since then. When that was gone, I've never felt that again. I hated divorce. I didn't hate my mom, and I didn't hate my dad, but I couldn't fathom us not being a family living together. For me, the world had ended.

My dad couldn't afford child support. She got the house. He got the car. I went to live with him, and my brother went to live with my

mom. My dad and I moved into a boarding house in the Heights on 16th and Waverly. Me and my dad slept in the same room, and there was another double bed in the room with two strangers that slept in it. I had to change schools. My panic attacks got worse.

Edward and my mother got married, but she kept her marriage a secret from me for a long time because she knew I didn't like the guy. I couldn't accept him as a stepfather.

I never saw my mom and my dad together after that. When my dad went to my mom's house to pick me up, he would park a half block down the street. But he stayed in love with her up until he died. Every time I'd see him or play golf with him for all those years, he'd say, "How's your mama?" "She's fine." "You know I'll always love her." "Yeah, Dad, I know that." And I'd change the subject because not only was it painful for him, it was painful for me.

I always knew my dad loved me. He was my hero. In my mind there was nothing that he couldn't do or he couldn't fix. But he wasn't a hugger or a toucher till after the divorce. Then he would lay there and hold me at night and shake and scream and cry and plead, "What can we do to bring her back? Please Jesus God!"

Edward and my mother were married a long time. Then he called me one night. I was in San Antonio and he was crying. I was already married and had a kid by that time. He said, "Bush, I need your help." I said, "What's the problem?" He said, "I met this guy at work and he'd just hit town. Didn't have a place to stay, so I brought him to our house. His name was Clarence. I let him stay at our place till he could get on his feet. Him and your mama just left together."

Sound familiar? It's a pattern. I hated that kind of behavior so bad. Yet I turned out just like that. What I hated the most is what I turned out to be.

I don't hate my mother for this. Her third husband, Clarence, was finally the kind of guy she should have been married to all along. He was the dominant one. When she met him, he was a drunk, and she found out later he'd been to prison. A few years after they got married he had a heart attack. That stopped him from drinking. He kind of mellowed out and started going to church. I saw a change in my mom. She never had her aches and pains anymore. She wasn't sick anymore. She didn't complain anymore. Her feet hit the floor running in the morning; he had her hoppin', making bread, going to the store. Some women have to have a man whose word is the law. That's the kind of father she had. She stayed with Clarence until he died.

But I'll tell you one thing: I have never taken any shit off a woman, to the point where I'm not even fair about it sometimes. I made myself a promise that I would never go through what my daddy did. He gave his love, his trust, his life to a woman who couldn't love him back. I made up my mind that I was not ever gonna be hurt. I was going to do unto others as they would do unto me, but I was gonna do it first.

The first time I had sex I was twelve years old, not too long after my first date. I was staying with my aunt Adele and Uncle Jerry. There was this little girl who lived nearby. She was two years older than me. We began to go to the movies on Saturday afternoon, and we went to the same church, and we had hayrides, and we'd play kissing games, spin the bottle, and all those kid games that can lead to sex.

We began to touch and explore body parts. She was as hot as I was; her hormones were raging as much as mine. I don't want to say her name because today she's happily married and has grandchildren. So we'll just refer to her as Betty.

I stayed there with my aunt and uncle for a while after my parents split up. They had this little bedroom in the back of the house. Betty would come over under the guise of helping me with my homework. The minute that door shut, I mean we got it on.

I thought I was pretty lucky. I'd tell my uncle Jerry Jericho about it, and he'd just laugh and say, "That's my boy!" But my aunt didn't know it. I guarantee you, she didn't know it.

We knew it was wrong, but that didn't stop us. I'd promise God that I'd quit doing this, and do it again the next night. Which would bring on more guilt. We were going to the same church, on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and on Wednesday nights!

I was twelve years old, so I was probably shooting blanks. By the grace of God, that was probably the only thing that saved my life.

That went on for about a year, I guess. Then she went on to high school and started dating older boys. And then it was a long dry spell for me: from thirteen to sixteen, which doesn't seem like a long time now, but it was an eternity back then. It was an awkward time. I was a horny little bastard. My face started breaking out with pimples.

When sixteen came around I had a car and started dating girls again. Things started leveling out. It wasn't too long after that the pimples went away.

THE PIPELINER BLUES

I'm an old pipeliner and I lay my line all day
I'm an old pipeliner and I lay my line all day
I got several women hangin' 'round
To help me spend my pay

—"THE PIPELINER BLUES," WRITTEN AND RECORDED BY MOON MULLICAN

MUSIC HAS ALWAYS BEEN my one true love. Sometimes I'd bring the guitar to school and sing for the class: Al Dexter's "Pistol Packin' Momma"—a tremendous jukebox hit at the beginning of the war—"She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain," songs like that.

Ninety-eight percent of the radio shows back then were live. And then around 1945 or '46, I started to hear records by Ernest Tubb and Red Foley and Roy Acuff and people like that. I thought they were live. This one guy named Bay Fritts had a fifteen-minute show that come on at noon on KXYZ called *The Hillbilly Bandwagon*. His theme song was the old fiddle tune "Back Up and Push." A very exciting fiddle hoedown.

And during this fifteen minutes he would play records, and I thought those people were there in the studio. I didn't know.

The big bands were in the movies, and we liked that too. Tommy Dorsey's "Boogie Woogie" is what we learned to jitterbug to. That was around the fifth or sixth grade. Then there were the gimmick songs: "Kilroy Was Here," "Open the Door, Richard." Big hits. In the sixth grade, the biggest popular songs of the day were Ernest Tubb's "Rainbow at Midnight" and Spade Cooley's "Detour." I do "Detour" on some of my shows today. We were also buying records by Louis Jordan, like "Choo Choo Ch'Boogie."

I always liked the Louis Jordan records and some of the pop music. I kind of liked it all. Basically, I was a hillbilly because I played guitar and sang. But I always had a likin' for the other music.

The Pioneer Bus Company had two central terminals in Houston. They had jukeboxes in there. I started hearing Bob Wills's "Still Water Runs the Deepest," "Roly Poly," "My Confession," "Hang Your Head in Shame." I *loved* those songs.

I knew I had the rhythm and what we call meter. Meter is when you can hear a song and play along. This is something that cannot be taught. If you don't have that natural instinct to play in meter, you'll never learn to play an instrument, because they'll be going one way and you'll be going another. I'd sing sometimes with my aunt. She sang flat and sharp, and I knew it and she didn't. So I knew I had a talent. Singing was always part of being in the family. Mom and Dad would sing harmony. I thought it was just beautiful. They'd be on the porch, and he'd be singing along, and she'd come in with the harmony. That intrigued me.

I got my brother to start singing with me. "Springtime in the Rockies," songs like that. Then Homer and Jethro started hittin' with their comedy bits. Homer and Jethro were very accomplished musicians, in the league of Chet Atkins. But people didn't know that 'cause they done these crazy, funny things. My brother and I started learning their songs. Remember the song "Managua, Nicaragua"? "Managua, Nicaragua is a heavenly spot / Coffee and bananas with the temperature hot." Homer and Jethro sang, "Manauger, Nicarauger is a heavenly spot / Coffee and bananers and the tempature hot."

My brother and I would learn these songs. I'd play guitar, and we'd go sing these silly songs and kill the audience.

My uncle, Smilin' Jerry Jericho, had several regional hit records after the war, including "Moonlight Island," "Ragged But Right" and "Why Don't You Haul Off and Love Me." People called him Smilin'

Jerry because of his big beautiful teeth. He had a fan club called the Smile Awhile Club.

Uncle Jerry had a program on KTHT on Monday nights called *The Blue Jean Jamboree*. My uncle got us to come down and audition for the station manager. He loved us and put us on the air. Here's two little kids, one playing guitar and the other singing harmony. Needless to say, I was the star of Hamilton Junior High. I was king of the campus.

To promote the rodeo, big stars of the rodeo would come down to *The Blue Jean Jamboree* on Monday night to say hello, maybe sing a

"Smilin'" Jerry Jericho, Johnny's uncle and a local legend in Houston, photographed at Daily's Record Ranch, circa 1947.

Bush Shinn, child star of the Blue Jean Jamboree *in Houston, circa 1948.*

song. One night, Gene Autry came through the door. I was floored. Gene Autry! I'd been seeing him in the movies. My all-time hero of the day, with Roy Rogers.

When I was introduced to Gene Autry, the only thing I could think of to say was, "How's Champion?" The horse. We all loved Champion as much as we loved Gene Autry.

He said, "Champion's fine. If you'll come down, I'll let you ride him."

Can you imagine him saying that to a kid from Kashmere Gardens with mud on his boots?

I did get to go to the rodeo, but I couldn't get backstage. But in my dreams I took a ride on Champion that night.

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After my parents got divorced, my dad and I stayed in that boarding house for a few months. He was slowly losing his mind. My grandfather, his daddy, saw him deteriorating and contacted one of my dad's old girlfriends that he had when they lived in Austin. She was a lot older than my dad was, but I didn't know that at the time. And she'd had polio when she was little and had a real bad leg. My grandfather contacted her folks and found out she'd been working for the government in Washington, D.C. He contacted her, told her what had happened, and invited her down.

My dad had nothing. He owned two pairs of pants, a pair of shoes and he had a job, and that's all he had. She had a little money. They had a few dates and decided to get married. She bought a house. She bought a new car. I went to live with them, and every day I would have to hear, "Your father had nothing. I bought this. I did this."

Nothing I did seemed to be right with her. My stepmom resented me. She wanted Dad, and taking on somebody else's teenager wasn't the easiest thing in the world. I understand more about it now than I did then. She was handicapped, and she had to wash and iron and make the home, and she really wasn't able to do that.

I knew my dad had been through enough. I didn't want to cause any trouble, so I went to live with my mom. She had to work every day. She wasn't there. My stepfather worked off and on. He was a roughneck in the oilfield. He would rather not have had me there, and I didn't think too much of him, either.

That's when it dawned on me. I had to make a life for myself. I

had to do something because neither my stepmom nor my stepdad wanted me around. I was fourteen.

That's when I made the move to live with my aunt Adele and my uncle Jerry. They treated me like an adult. Jerry taught me how to drive and how to do carpentry work. He was building onto his house. Jerry'd throw me the car keys and say, "Go to the lumber yard and get me six two-by-fours and a bag of nails."

I'm fourteen years old. I don't have a driver's license, but I'm drivin' a good-looking car, you know. I'm thinking, "Wow. This is it." My stepmom wouldn't allow me to drive *their* car. She treated me like I was three years old. My stepdad knew I didn't like him, so I couldn't drive *their* car, either.

TWO YEARS LATER, the Korean War come on strong. They were drafting guys soon as they turned eighteen. Well, I got to thinking about that. I said, "I'm sixteen. By the time, I'm eighteen, I could get killed." A lot of my friends were getting drafted. I thought, "I want to get a job, and buy me a car, and have a little fun, before I have to go in the army and get shot at and maybe die."

So I quit going to school—Jeff Davis High School—in the tenth grade. The minute I turned sixteen, I could legally quit school. Nobody seemed to care. Nobody said, "You need to finish school." Nobody cared one way or the other, least of all me.

It wasn't that I was a bad student. It was a bad time for me in my life. And I was trying to cram as much living as I could into two years before I was going to have to go and be killed. That's exactly the way I looked at it. (Eventually, I was drafted, though not until after the Korean War had ended, and I didn't have to go in because I was classified 1-Y on account of my chronic bronchitis and other medical problems I didn't even know I had.)

After I quit school, I went to work in the oilfields with my uncle Leroy. We were making $100 every two weeks. That was a fortune! One hundred dollars every two weeks for a sixteen-year-old kid? I bought a car, bought clothes, and was having a big time and going places and got to be pretty independent.

I don't regret one minute I spent in the oilfields. But I wouldn't go back in there for a million dollars. The weather was fierce. If the winters didn't kill you, the summers would.

My stepfather also worked in the oilfields. Several times my mom would go to visit him on different locations, and my brother and I would go. So I got acquainted with some of the guys he worked with. One of 'em named Bill Gehrles offered me and Leroy jobs on his crew. I was so green, if you'd told me to take that wrench and break that pipe loose, I wouldn't have known which way to turn it.

I was a kid among men, sixteen years old, but I felt like I was a man, too. Call it dumb, but I was loving every minute of it.

As soon as one location was over, you might be off a month or two before another location would come up. During this time, we'd run around. My buddies and I had girls all over the state. Me and my uncle Leroy worked anywhere from Beaumont to Kountze, Silsbee, Winnie, Anahuac, Columbus, Eagle Lake, Edna, Friendswood, Baytown. All over South and East Texas. The fifties were a boom time in the Texas oil patch.

We always worked for day tower, eight o'clock in the morning until four, no break. The evening tower came on to relieve you. If your relief man didn't show up, you had to double, work his shift, sixteen hours without a break. Graveyard came on. If your man didn't show up, you worked graveyard. By then, it's daytime again, it's your shift. Many's the time I worked twenty-four hours, straight through.

My stepdad was glad to see me go to work. He was a driller, and he ran a crew on the evening tower. I never worked in his crew, which was a good thing.

But he did get me on with the company, where his friend Bill Gehrles made life hell for me and Leroy. Off the job, he was fatherly, friendly. We could borrow his pickup to go to town. On the job, he was an ex-marine drill sergeant who gave no quarter. At the same time, he made men out of us. When we got off at night, we were so damn tired that we couldn't think about getting into any trouble anywhere. We didn't smoke. We didn't drink. I thought we were pretty good boys. Compared to today's standards, we were saints.

I had a girlfriend back in Houston, Billie Jean Woodard. I met her when I was between oilfield jobs. I was working for Weingarten's grocery store in the produce department, and she had a summer job working in the deli. I used to pick her up in my car and bring her to work. We started dating and fell in love. I bought an engagement ring and she accepted it. I didn't have sex with her, either. She went back to school in the fall. I went back to the oilfield in Beaumont.

Once a month, somebody would double for me so I could have a

day off and go see her. We were parked behind her house one night, and she looked up at me with a cold, icy stare and dropped the ring in my hand and said it was over between us. She had met a tall good-looking football player at Davis High School.

That's when my puppy got run over. To this day, I can't describe the pain. It hurts just as bad at sixteen as it does at thirty-six or sixty-six. Much later I wrote a song about that night, called "September in Your Eyes." You really can't sing country music unless you know how it feels to have your puppy run over.

AFTER JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL I had kind of put the guitar down once my brother lost interest in our little duo act. But something happened around this time that rekindled my love affair with music. I heard this voice. It was unlike Hank, unlike Ernest Tubb and Roy Acuff and Red Foley. There was an *excitement* in this voice.

I'm talking about Lefty Frizzell. Everywhere I'd go where there was a jukebox, I'd play a Lefty Frizzell song. Even though I'd always liked these other people, especially Bob Wills and Ernest Tubb, Lefty was new. He was different. He became *our* singer.

We'd go to restaurants in the morning, listening to Lefty Frizzell on the jukebox through them big old Wurlitzer speakers. Today, even with all our sophisticated playback equipment, it don't sound as good to me as that did, for some reason. Those old 78s through those big Wurlitzer speakers. It was wonderful.

When Lefty got hot, I was working in the oilfields. I remember being on location in Beaumont, Texas, at Spindletop, where the first big gusher came in, in 1901—the Lucas gusher. It blew out and they couldn't cap it off, and after so many days, it just quit. But that's what opened up all those fields down there.

What I didn't know at the time is that Lefty Frizzell was living right there in Beaumont! I thought he was from California. All those towns that I worked around, I don't know how many times our paths crossed. Places like Big Spring, Texas. He lived and worked in Big Spring. I didn't know that until I read the book about him. He was cutting his records at Beck's Studios in Dallas, and I didn't know that, either. Beck's was one of the first recording studios in Texas.

Anyway, Lefty was my hero. There was a great mystique, if that's the word. You'd hear a guy on the radio, it might be a year or two before you know what he looked like. There was no country music on TV, and

I was too young to go to a joint if somebody came to town. If I was lucky enough to get a *Country Song Roundup*, which for so many years was the only country publication, that's how you found out what guys looked like.

Well, here was this guy in his Nudie suits, with fringe, a big old Gibson guitar with "Lefty Frizzell" on it, and a big old black Cadillac. He was Elvis! He was Elvis before there was an Elvis.

And women . . . Come to find out, he had women problems. Statutory rape. He spent like fourteen months in the county jail in Roswell, New Mexico. Today, you get more than fourteen months for statutory rape.

Of course, I'd learned how to play the guitar. I'd been on radio and done a lot of singing. But I was still a kid.

One time out in the field we were pulling a string of muddy pipe. We'd been in the hole, using drilling mud to keep the oil down so it wouldn't blow out on us. So we start coming out of the hole, pulling sixty feet of tubing. When you break that joint, mud just flies everywhere. And that north wind was blowing, and it was cold enough to freeze the horns off a billy goat. I mean, it was really cold.

And I told this guy across the floor from me, "I'm not gonna be doing this the rest of my life, you know."

He said, "What are you going to be doing?"

I said, "I'm gonna be a singer. I'm gonna pick and sing. I'm gonna write songs. And I'm gonna be an entertainer."

He said, "Sure you are."

And I said, "You ever heard of Lefty Frizzell?"

"Hell, yeah. Who hasn't?"

"That's what I want to be like. Them Cadillacs and them suits and them places, you know."

It wasn't long after that that Uncle Jerry called me. I was between oilfield jobs.

My uncle asked me, "What are you doing the next couple of days?" And I said, "Nothing." He said, "You want to drive me to San Antonio? I've got a gig and I've got to come right back right. I need some help driving 'cause I'm at Magnolia Gardens on Sunday."

When I was growing up in Houston, Magnolia Gardens was the place to go on Sunday afternoon. People'd sit around in their bathing suits in the sand and watch the show. That's where I saw Hank Thompson a few times. Elvis came to Magnolia Gardens once, but I wasn't there. All the country stars came to Magnolia Gardens at one time or

Lefty Frizzell, Johnny's idol and first vocal influence, circa 1950.

another. It was located east of Houston, out Highway 90 toward Beaumont, across the San Jacinto River.

I said, "Oh, yeah. I'll be glad to do it." On the way up there, he asked me, "Whatever happened to your aspirations of becoming a singer?" And I said, "Oh, they're still there." He said, "I've got a fifteen-minute radio show today on KMAC. Why don't you sing one?"

I said, "You're kiddin'!"

We got there at four or five in the afternoon. Went to the radio station. The club that he was working for had purchased a fifteen-minute slot for him to sing and play guitar and talk, advertising the Round-Up Club.

It was the first time I got stage fright in my life. I was scared to death. I think it was because it had been so long since I'd sung in public. To me, this was the big time. This wasn't a schoolhouse. This wasn't somebody's porch. This was totally different from the *Blue Jean Jamboree* back in Houston. This was a live radio show, in a strange town.

And to top it all off, Jerry put the guitar on me, introduced me, and walked out of the studio.

I sang an old George Morgan song, a thing called "Whistle My Love." I don't know why I didn't sing that Lefty Frizzell song I loved, "Forever and Always."

I told my uncle, "Man, don't ever do that to me again." He laughed. Wasn't no big deal to him. I thought everybody in San Antonio was listening. That's how green how I was. I didn't know it took years to get people to listen to you.

The next week, I received a piece of mail. Somebody out there liked me. I didn't know if they really liked me or if they were making fun of me. I was kind of paranoid.

But when my uncle asked me, "You want to make this trip with me again?" I said, "Yeah." This time there was gonna be a band at the club, and they were at the studio: piano, guitar, steel, fiddle, bass and drums. The leader's name was Al Rogers, and he recorded for Capitol Records. My uncle told me he was a big name. I'd never heard of him at that time. He had a voice like Bing Crosby. Real friendly guy.

We went to the Round-Up Club that night. A couple of women from Corpus [Christi] showed up: older women, thirty-five years old, good-looking too. They knew my uncle.

The lady said to me, "Would you like a drink?"

"Sure. Whaddya got?"

"Gin and grapefruit juice."

I said, "My favorite." I didn't know what the hell she was talking about. I had never drank liquor in my life.

Back in those days, they didn't know what air conditioning was in the joints. It was hot. It's in the summertime and the place was packed. And she liked to dance. Both of 'em liked to dance. We'd come off the dance floor, and she'd pour that gin and ice and grapefruit juice. Boy, it tasted great! I was drinking it like it was iced tea.

After a while I begun to notice some changes in my body. My lips began to buzz. And I was a little unsteady on my feet. So I got my uncle to follow me outside, and I said, "Am I acting all right?"

And he said, "Yeah. Why?"

I said, "I'm not doing anything weird, am I?"

He said, "No. You're fine."

I said, "Well, I had a few drinks with these ladies."

He said, "Man, ain't gonna kill ya."

He didn't drink at all. He was a teetotaler. Later, I wondered why he thought it was funny for me to drink and mess around. Maybe I was his secret alter ego.

Back inside, I done some more drinkin' and some more dancin'. That night, that thirty-five-year-old woman took me out in her car and we went out in a cornfield. Boy, that was heaven.

Well, that started it. On the way home I got to telling my uncle about it, and he was just dying laughing. I said, "Sure enough, was I acting all right? Did I look dumb or stupid? Was I being embarrassing or obnoxious?"

He said, "No. The only thing you were doing that was kind of funny was when you would walk, you'd pick your feet up real high, like you were walking in high grass."

I began to make every trip to San Antonio with my uncle. I guess I was one of the world's first roadies. My job was to carry the guitar in and out and check us into a motel and carry Jerry's bags and his clothes. And Al Rogers would listen to me sing.

It was during this period when I met Jean, who became my first wife, in the Round-Up Club. Funny thing was, I was trying to put the move on her mother, who was very friendly and a good dancer and kept talking about her beautiful daughter that wanted to meet me. I had no realization at the time that I was trying to hit on my future mother-in-law, who would become one of the best friends I ever had.

I must say, at the time, Jean was not only a beautiful girl, but she had a great personality, too. Something clicked between us. The difference between Jean and most of the other girls I had known was that Jean was a good girl. She didn't do the things I expected from the others.

Even after my Uncle Jerry quit playing the Round-Up Club, I would go to San Antonio once a month to see Jean. I'd go up onstage with the Al Rogers Band and sing "Forever and Always," Lefty Frizzell's tune. Our first Christmas, before we got married, Jean gave me a watch. On the back of the watch was inscribed "Forever and Always, Jean." It was a great song. Still is. I might record it one day.

We planned to get married. Well, I wasn't old enough to get married, so her mother illegally signed her name to a document as my guardian so I could get a marriage license. This was a few days before I turned eighteen, in February 1953.

I moved to San Antonio and worked many, many day jobs. Hated them all. It was a means to keep me alive so I could pick on the weekend.

Now Al Rogers had a radio show every day, and he would ask me

Jean Shinn, Johnny's first wife, in San Antonio, circa 1953.

to come over to KONO and sing. KONO was the radio station where Ernest Tubb had his live show after he moved to San Antonio from KGKL in San Angelo. One song Al Rogers had me learn was "Too Blue to Care," written by his steel-guitar player, Stan Kesler, who later wrote "I Forgot to Remember to Forget" for Elvis Presley.

There was a TV show in town at this time called *Red River Dave* on Saturday night. And I went down to audition for him. And Red River Dave said, "You're a good-lookin' kid. You sing good. But you sound like Lefty Frizzell. Can't use you."

I'm like, "What does he know?"

But it was true. I hadn't found my style yet. I was aping Lefty.

There was a little club in town way out in the boonies on the Bandera Highway called the Texas Star Inn. The guy that owned it, his name was Frank Kline. And he also owned an appliance store downtown. He played Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at his own club with his own band. And on Monday night he had a TV show on Channel 5, which in those days was KEYL.

I went out to audition 'cause Al Rogers had called him. He knew that Frank hired some green kids. This was in December 1952. I was still seventeen.

The old man, Frank Kline, drank a lot. Big fat guy. He was a Yankee. He was a tightwad. But in a way, he had a big heart. He didn't play an instrument. He would get up on the bandstand and hold an upright bass and pantomime. Like he had somebody to fool. And when he would sing, the fiddle player would play straight melody right into his ear so he could hold the melody. He was a cantankerous old bastard, and he had his wife working in the kitchen, making hamburgers and fries. He was making it with his secretary at the time. But he heard me sing and he hired me.

Dig this: He paid me $10 a night, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Thirty bucks! Just for the weekend? That's big money back in '52, the beginning of '53. His appliance store sponsored a TV show. He'd be on there, drunker than hell, trying to sell a refrigerator. Everything was live. One time he bent over to show how to pull a drawer out of a deep freezer, and this half pint of Old Stag fell out of his boot, right on camera. It was hilarious.

I was singin' live on TV, man! You beat that? I'm on TV, and I got a regular gig three nights a week. I thought, "This is it. I'm at the top."

I went by KONO to thank Al Rogers for putting in a plug for me with Frank Kline, and guess who was there? Lefty Frizzell, my hero, live in person! I got to shake his hand and talk to him for a minute. Seen that Cadillac outside, you know. He was in a sport coat, with gambler's striped pants, a silver saddle watchband—first one I ever saw, looked like a saddle around his wrist—wingtip Nudie boots, and this big diamond ring with the initials LF on his hand.

God, he had class, man.

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FOREVER AND ALWAYS

Forever and always, my love will be true
I'd wait a lifetime, if you ask me to
You make me so happy, then leave me so blue
But I'd wait forever, and always for you
—"FOREVER AND ALWAYS," WRITTEN AND RECORDED BY LEFTY FRIZZELL

So I BEGAN TO WORK PROFESSIONALLY in San Antonio. It was Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at the Texas Star Inn. Frank Kline was good about giving kids a break, but he knew absolutely nothing about music. He was just in it for the buck.

On Sunday we started at about three in the afternoon and played until midnight. We played a matinee, and with the price of the tickets, customers got a barbecue dinner. To a seventeen-year-old kid at that time, playing three nights a week and making thirty bucks . . . It took

all week on my day job to bring home thirty dollars, but I was grossing sixty dollars a week—not bad for a seventeen-year-old in those days.

The TV show was on Monday night. We were required to learn two new songs a week, which is still good for a band to do to stay current. Of course, now I can't get my band to learn any of this new country shit, and I don't blame 'em. So we don't do a lot of it. But back then, Lefty Frizzell and Hank Williams *were* the new country.

The Texas Star Inn was a limestone building that resembled the Alamo, in a way. It had a dance hall and bar on the first floor. The second floor was a small apartment where Frank Kline and his family lived. You could get 300 people in the dance hall if you really crammed them in. You could bring your own bottle or buy beer there. That's the way it was in Texas then. There was no liquor by the drink until decades later. The building is still there, by the way. Today it's a barbecue joint.

It was a good gig, and I was just learning to play well enough to play rhythm guitar in a band. There's two ways you can play a guitar rhythm. You play chords to the song, or you can play what they called slap rhythm. Hit the bass strings with the right hand and kind of deaden the strings with the left hand and chop. *Boom, chop, boom, chop.*

The Texas Star Inn, Johnny's first real paying gig, on San Antonio's Bandera Highway. Photo courtesy of Geronimo Trevino.

On that bandstand was the first set of drums I'd ever seen up close. I'd always had a thing for the drums. At the old Queen Theater one night when I was about ten, we'd seen a movie that featured Gene Krupa, the great jazz drummer. It just thrilled me to death. When I got home—must have been nine or ten at night—I took the rounds out of an old chair that was in the backyard and took one of my mom's washtubs and I began to play a solo. You could have heard me all over that neighborhood. Lights began to come on, you know. My mother came out and said, "What in the hell are you doing?" I was Gene Krupa, and I was playing on a washtub with old chair rounds!

EVERYBODY CALLED ME BUSH back then, after my middle name. The fiddle player in my uncle's band was named Johnny Sapp, who'd played with Ernest Tubb on the Grand Ole Opry in the '40s, and then moved back to Houston and worked for my uncle. So there was a band-uniform belt in my uncle's closet with the name Johnny on it. I needed a belt, a western belt. So he let me have it. I didn't pay too much attention to the name on it.

I had been introduced to Frank Kline as Bush Shinn, but I had Johnny on my belt. I guess it kind of confused him. So on my first TV-show appearance, Frank Kline says, "Here's our new vocalist with the Texas Star Playboys, Johnny Bush!" Pissed me off so bad I almost lost my train of thought. Under my breath, I thought, "The old rum-soaked bastard don't even know my name!"

The very next day, I had to go down to the musician's union to pick up my union card. You had to join the union back in those days. The secretary of Local 23 of the Musicians' Union had my card all typed out: "Johnny Bush." And I just threw it back at him and said, "That is not my name." He said, "What is your name?" I said, "My name is John Bush Shinn III. People call me Bush." He said, "Well, is it gonna be Bush Shinn or what?" I said, "John Shinn's my name. Put that on there." He said, "Oh man, Johnny Bush is a lot more commercial than John Shinn." I think he just didn't want to type out another card. You know, like, "Get out of here, punk!"

So I left. I thought, what difference does it make, you know? Frank Kline kept on introducing me as Johnny Bush, and I still didn't like it. But that union guy was right: "Johnny Bush" is a lot more commercial for a stage name than "Bush Shinn." However, it wasn't until 1968 that I had to change my name legally because by then I'd had some recogni-

tion and it was beginning to get confusing. I mean, God knows we don't want to confuse the IRS no more than they already are.

One Sunday afternoon at the Texas Star Inn, the drummer didn't show up. So Frank Kline said, "Johnny, you're the drummer tonight." I had been Gene Krupa when I was nine, but I had never touched a drum, a real drum.

Now if he would have been a musician, he would have known better. He would have got on the phone to call a drummer. But not only did he not know any better, I don't think he really gave a damn. He figured the people out there were as dumb as he was. I got back on the drums, and I had no idea what to do. I got my right foot on the kick drum and my left on the sock, and I had the snare and cymbals and two brushes and two sticks. His son, Frank Jr., played steel. He turned around and said, "John, first beat is kick, second beat is snare drum with the high hat—boom-chick."

So they called a tune, and I was going along—boom-chick, boom-chick. All of a sudden, it felt good to me. It come easy for me, and I was groovin' on it.

For us to get paid, we'd have to go all the way down to Frank Kline's appliance store. He'd be sitting at this big old desk, readin' the paper. I'd come in and sit down at the desk to get my money from the Friday-Saturday-Sunday gig. He'd never look up. He'd read every page of that damn paper. Completely ignore you, knowing that's why you came in, to get paid. I'd be going, "Ahem." Looking at my watch. He'd puff on his cigar and turn the page. Just being a cantankerous bastard. He loved the role he was playing.

Finally, he'd look up and reach in his pocket. "How many nights you work?" "Three." "What nights was that?" "Friday, Saturday, Sunday." "Let's see, that's $10 . . . You know you could be singin' those songs a little better than you been doin'." "Yessir, I'll do better." "Let's see, where was I? $10, $11, $12 . . . You learn any new songs this week?" "Yessir, I've got two in mind." "Well, rehearsal is tomorrow night. You were late last week." "No sir, I wasn't late. That was Carl." "Oh. $11, $12, $13"—this would just go on and on. He was just being an ass.

We were drawing good crowds. In those days, to get to Bandera, Texas, you had to come out Culebra Road. It made a bend out by St. Mary's University and became Bandera Highway. You had to go right by the Texas Star Inn, which is just a little south of Helotes.

Bandera was the hot spot. It was Texas's answer to Sodom and Gomorrah. The most popular honky-tonk in Bandera was the Cabaret

Club. Smiley Whitley and the Texans, a ten-piece band, broadcast live from the Cabaret Club every Saturday night. They had a telephone line that went to San Antonio radio station KMAC, which was an affiliate of ABC.

Can you imagine something like that today? Having a network pick up a live show at some skull orchard? It ain't gonna happen.

A skull orchard, by the way, is another name for a nightclub, a honky-tonk, a joint. They're all toilets, no matter what they say. Hank Penny, one of the first acts that ever played Vegas, once said about the Golden Nugget that it was "an upholstered sewer." Which it is. They're all toilets.

Smiley Whitley was a steel-guitar player who played a lot like Leon McAuliffe with the Texas Playboys. Smiley bought one of the first triple-neck Fender steel guitars. Leon McAuliffe probably had one too, but Smiley had the first one I ever saw. Jerry Byrd, who is known as Mr. Steel Guitar, only had a single-neck steel guitar. You ask Buddy Emmons and Jimmy Day—my favorite steel guitar players—who *their* favorite steel guitar player is, they'll tell you Jerry Byrd. He had no pedals. He played so true and so good. That steel-guitar break on Hank Williams's "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," that was Jerry Byrd.

One time Smiley Whitley asked Jerry Byrd, "When you gonna get one of these three-neck guitars?" Jerry Byrd said, "As soon as I learn to play the one I've got."

Here I am wandering again. The point I'm trying to make is that people on their way to Bandera or on their way back would stop at the Texas Star Inn. A lot of times, I would look out at an audience and see Smiley Whitley, who drove his band around in brand-new Cadillacs. The band members wore blue serge suits with red string ties and white cowboy hats. This was big time to me then. Hell, it's big time now.

So I would go up to musicians like Smiley and introduce myself. He was always kind and polite. I was in awe of these guys.

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOON was what we'd call jam sessions at the Texas Star Inn. Nobody else worked on Sunday afternoon. All the musicians that were off would come out to the Texas Star Inn and have the barbecue chicken and sit in with the band. I began to play around more on the drums.

One week Frank Kline started having the band rehearsals at the joint on Fridays, but he was letting people in for free to listen and dance.

I'm thinking, what kind of a deal is this? That cut my pay by one-third. I'm down to twenty bucks a week now. Nobody said anything. So we'd rehearse. I'd look up, people are dancing. I'm thinking, you know, this is a job that we're playing here, and he's calling it a rehearsal.

Between tunes he'd have one of the band members take this big ol' slop jar out into the audience and ask for tips. I was totally opposed to that. Still am to this day. Back in the Depression, guys would go into places and play for tips to make a living. That was different. There was no Depression in the early 1950s. Times were, in fact, pretty good. This was a cheapskate's way out, and I resented it.

It was finally my turn to take the slop bucket out into the crowd. I refused to do it. And that old fat bastard fired me. I went to the union and ratted on him. He called me and tried to hire me back, but I wouldn't go back.

Instead, I went to work for the Mission City Playboys as a singer and rhythm-guitar player. The band was led by two brothers, Dave and Edwin Isbell, and we worked any little dive around San Antonio that would hire us. After playing on TV every week, this was kind of like starting at the top and working my way down. It was years before I made ten dollars a night again.

Dave Isbell didn't play an instrument with the Mission City Playboys. He just sang. Carl Walker, one of the guys in the old Frank Kline band, played steel guitar. I played rhythm guitar and sang. Bill Josko played the drums, and Dave's brother Roger played the bass. They had this old '46 or '47 Cadillac limo, stretch job. It was trashed out, but it was a way to get around.

I really began working on my singing at this time. Webb Pierce and Hank Locklin had this high range. I could sing like that. I also had a pretty fair midrange. I liked Hank Snow, and tried a few of his numbers—"Why Do You Punish Me?" and songs like that.

Hank Thompson impressed me so much with the way he would enunciate every syllable. If you're trying to tell a story in a song or in a poem, whatever, you must convey those words. This impressed me. Sing distinctly. Be sure to sing that *s* at the end of "kisses" instead of "ki . . ." That was important for me even then, even though I didn't know what I was doing.

First time I saw Hank Thompson was at Cook's Hoedown in Houston. Cook's Hoedown was on the corner of Capitol and Smith, three or four blocks from the old city auditorium, where they held the Hometown Jamboree. Whoever they would book at the Jamboree could go

down and sing a couple of songs at Cook's Hoedown to make twenty-five bucks more. It was the biggest joint I'd ever seen at that time. You could put a thousand people in there. Nobody called it a honky-tonk. A honky-tonk was some place like the old 40-40 or the Little York Club or the Harbor Lights. By comparison, Cook's Hoedown had class.

Hank was one of the first country legends who was not a bumpkin. He was educated. He can sit down and quote poetry for hours. He's eloquent. My favorite was his rendition of "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe. One time we were out deer hunting on a ranch in Comfort, Texas. After dinner, in the hunting cabin, Hank broke out the white wine. Our hostess brought out some paper cups. Hank picked up the paper cup, looked at it as if it had shit on it, and said, "You don't have a wineglass?" We are in the middle of nowhere, it's midnight, in a hunting camp, and he wants a wineglass. The hostess was embarrassed, and started looking frantically. After a long search she finally found one, and proudly handed it to Hank, who said, "It isn't chilled." That's Hank. To know him is to love him.

THE BIG CHANGE in my singing came the first time I heard Ray Price. It was the summer of 1952, and the song was "Let Me Come In and Talk to Your Heart." Even though to anybody else he was aping Hank Williams, I heard something altogether different. He had a quality in his voice that I thought was a lot better than Hank Williams. You could hear that excitement in his voice, same as the first time I heard Lefty. It had that falsetto break. Ray couldn't yodel, but he knew where to put that little falsetto break.

Hank Williams was the biggest star in country music at that time, rivaled only by Lefty Frizzell in terms of drawing power and money per performance. I have to admit that I was never too hung up on Hank Williams's singing. His songs were great, but I would have rather heard Ray Price sing them.

Ray had a high range. His mids were good and his lows were good. Today, he don't fool with his highs. He uses a trick now. Ray recorded "Danny Boy" in E-flat and F. Today he sings it in C and D. But to the listener, he's still singing high. Not as high as when he recorded it, but you can still hear those high notes. (By the way, I use the same trick now.)

It was also around this time that I first heard my other main influence, Marty Robbins. His voice was incredible. They called him "the

Ray Price, 1954.

man with a tear in his voice." You could hear that soul. In an old promotional brochure my mother has, I said that my favorite singers were "Ray Price, Hank Thompson, Marty Robbins." I don't know why the hell I didn't put Lefty in there.

I think you will agree that hillbilly music—Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell—was the white man's blues. To me, there's just as much soul in honky-tonk songs like "Your Cheatin' Heart" and "I Love You a Thousand Ways" as there is in great jazz and blues tunes. Sometimes people say to me at a show, "Play me some soul music." I say, "I been doing it all night."

Back then, respectable hillbillies didn't like the word honky-tonk. And they resented the word "hillbilly." Bob Wills hated that word, "hillbilly." So did Ernest Tubb. Shit, he was one.

I don't know where the word "honky-tonk" came from, unless it stems from the black man calling us honkies. White people called them niggers and they called us honkies. I've been called a honky a lot of times, but I was never offended, I guess mainly because I don't know what it means. "Excuse me. Let me look that up! It may piss me off."

But I do know that when I was coming up, a honky-tonk was a bad place to be. They were on the outskirts of town. You didn't want people to see you go in. They were made out of scrap lumber and tar paper. They had beer bottle caps thrown out in front of the place to serve as gravel or paving so you wouldn't get that mud all over you or

get your car stuck. This was a honky-tonk, and it's where I learned my trade as a singer and musician.

There's two reasons why people went to honky-tonks. They were either looking to forget somebody or looking to find somebody. Men lookin' for women, women lookin' for men. It's the music that brings 'em in there. The *music*.

It started out with the jukeboxes, and then somebody got the wild idea that live music would bring in more people. They started off hiring one guy with a guitar and microphone. Sometimes they'd set him outside, and people would drive up in their car and drink beer in their cars while the troubadour sang outside with his microphone and his amplifier. I saw a lot of that.

The safest place to be in a honky-tonk was on the bandstand. You've heard stories about chicken wire being around the bandstand to protect the musicians from flying beer bottles? That was true. That wasn't no bullshit.

The Harbor Lights, over by the turning basin in the Houston Ship Channel, had chicken wire around it. I played there. I saw fights like you wouldn't believe in honky-tonks. Imagine how, during World War II, a guy comes home on leave, or he's just been discharged. He comes

Honky-tonk heroes: left to right, *Ben Christian, Jerry Jericho, Hank Williams, and KNUZ disc jockey Biff Collie at Daily's Record Ranch, circa 1949.*

home to an empty house, he goes to the nearest joint, and there's his wife in there dancing with a shipyard worker. All hell'd break loose. World War III.

Floyd Tillman told me the story of how he wrote "It Makes No Difference Now." He's in one of these typical places, working. A guy comes in and requests a song. Somewhere in the conversation he told Floyd, "She's not with me anymore and it makes no difference now." That night, he goes out in the parking lot and blows his brains out: "I don't worry cause it makes no difference now."

At the Harbor Lights one night a fight broke out between two stevedores from the Ship Channel turning basin. You've got people from all over the world bringing grain boats in there. Well, these stevedores would leave the ship, come over to the Harbor Lights. Fights, you wouldn't believe! Some guy, he'd dance with some gal. Some other guy would cut in, piss the guy off, a fight would break out. One time a guy went into the kitchen after he'd already knocked the guy out—he's laying on the dance floor—went into the kitchen, got a meat cleaver, come out, and chopped the guy's head off.

Honky-tonk. Nice place to be.

My first three wives come out of them joints.

I MARRIED JEAN IN 1953, one month after I started working at the Texas Star Inn, just shy of my eighteenth birthday.

Certainly, it's foolish for anybody to get married that young. No matter how much hard living you've done, when you're seventeen, you're still a child. But like I said, I was so anxious . . .

Jean's mom, Bobbie, was one of the best friends I ever had. She helped me in so many ways, you know. I lived with them for a while before I got married. If I had a job, she would buy me western shirts. If I was going out to the gig, she supported me every way she could. Just moral support, you know.

I knew I wanted to be a singer, but I had these day jobs that I had to contend with that were getting me down. I couldn't see myself being in whatever company it was for twenty years. Seeing guys that were fixing to retire, and they weren't any better off than I was—I couldn't see it. It didn't make sense to me.

But that was kind of the way my life was going. I made just enough money that I could keep picking on the weekends. And a lot of times, I couldn't get a day job. That's when I figured out I had to find an instru-

ment to where I could play music for a living, forget about the day jobs. I kept playing rhythm guitar, but I kept thinking, "I'm not that good a guitar player."

When Bill Josko got a job with a group going to Vegas, the drum job came open with the Mission City Playboys. They hired a guy who was an airman at Lackland Air Force Base. He was a good drummer, but his wife got to raising so much hell, he had to quit.

We had a job on the old Laredo Highway, south of San Antone, at a place called Al's Country Club. I said, "Well, let me a have a try at it." I didn't have any drums. The airman said, "I'll sell you mine." I said, "Hell, I don't have any money." He said, "What have you got to trade?" I'd planned a fishing trip one time. I bought this fancy rod and reel, a deep-sea fishing rig. But I didn't go because I had a gig somewhere. He said, "I'll take that and a hundred dollars. You can pay me five dollars a month."

My first set of drums.

So I became the Mission City Playboys' drummer. They would set a microphone back there so I could sing from the drums. I'd never seen anybody do this before. I got to really grooving on it. It's no harder than playing guitar and singing. You're playing guitar: boom-chuck, boom-chuck. Your foot's pattin' too, right? So what's the difference? It's the same thing. What I don't see is how anybody plays piano. How can this hand be doing something different from this hand? That baffles me.

You're not too visual behind the drums. But it's the safest place to be on the bandstand when the shit starts. One of the ways we had to generate extra money, we had a broom dance. This is how the broom dance works: you start a fast two-step, and one guy goes out with a broom, taps another guy on the shoulder, hands him the broom, and starts dancing with the girl. When the whistle blows, who's ever holding the broom has to put some money in the pot. It's a fun game, but it started more shit than you would believe. Some guy'd be coming out of the restroom, and there's his old lady or his girlfriend dancing with a stranger. So he walks up and pops him. Then it's World War III starting up again.

I'll tell you how rough Al's Country Club was. The guy that bought it, his name was Fox. He hadn't been there very long when there was a fight. Somebody took him outside and killed him. I mean, fights—you'd see two or three a night. We learned right away not to stop the music. Play faster and louder. If something was going on onstage, they were less likely to fight.

Easy Adams and the Texas Top Hands, a band I later played with in San Antone, used to go into "Dinah," the old Eddie Cantor song, whenever a fight started. Finally, one night they had a request for it. They were playing John T. Floore's Country Store in Helotes, outside of San Antone. The patio was packed. They started playing "Dinah," and half the place got up and went lookin' for the fight. Floore's is still in business, by the way, but things generally are a lot more peaceful now.

If you'll remember, 1954 was the year the black cloud appeared west of Nashville that today is known as rock and roll.

I can remember the first time I heard Elvis. Jean and I were listening to the *Louisiana Hayride*, a radio show out of Shreveport, Louisiana, one night in 1954. On rainy nights in San Antonio, we could pick up KWKH out of Shreveport. Elvis sang "That's All Right, Mama." I couldn't believe it. I said, "What is this? That ain't country. I don't know what it is." I remember Horace Logan, the emcee, couldn't quiet the crowd down.

Elvis didn't invent rock and roll. Before Elvis, there was "Shake, Rattle and Roll" and "Sh-boom Sh-boom"—songs like that by black artists. Bill Haley and the Comets, a white group, had a rock-and-roll hit way before Elvis did. Some of the bands around San Antone jumped on this bandwagon. Abandoned their western garb, started buying peg pants, string ties, and started playing this new music, rock and roll. It wasn't impressing me that much. Lefty Frizzell, Ray Price—*those* were my kind of singers.

Not that country was ever all I listened to. When I was still in school, country music in the daytime would go off the air. It wasn't on at night. Me and my uncle Leroy, we would listen to the black stations. We were gettin' off to some of that R&B stuff. It was some real good music being played. We didn't want to let anybody know we was listening to it, you know.

I got to thinking, "Now, if you're gonna be a hillbilly singer, a Lefty Frizzell, what are you listening to this shit for?" And then my other self would say, "Yeah, but damn, it's good. It's GOOD!"

In 1954 my uncle Jerry promised I could go with him to the second annual Jimmie Rodgers Day celebration in Meridian, Mississippi. Jean and I went—I didn't tell my day-job boss I was going to be gone four or five days. I called in sick.

Jimmie Rodgers was the first true King of Country Music. Bob Wills, Tommy Duncan, Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell—that's who they all wanted to sound like. More than anybody, he made country music into the white man's blues. He lived in Kerrville, Texas, toward the end of his life, but he was born in Mississippi.

We stopped in Houston to meet up with Uncle Jerry and Aunt Adele. Houston was having its Hometown Jamboree down at the city auditorium, and we went. That was the first time I heard George Jones. He'd just got out of the Marines.

George Jones was killin' the audience at the Hometown Jamboree. Standing ovations. "Encore!" "Encore!" He'd run out and he'd sing two bars of a song and quit. People would just go wild, going "Who is this guy?" He was like a cross between Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell. He was dynamite.

We left Houston and went on to Meridian, Mississippi. First time I'd been out of the state of Texas since we went to Oklahoma when I was a child. We stopped to eat in Louisiana. I ordered a chicken-fried steak. Lady come out and said, "I'm sorry. We don't have a chicken big enough to cut a steak off of." I swear this is true.

When we got to Meridian, I was in heaven. Everybody that was anybody in that day and time went to the Jimmie Rodgers Memorial

Backstage and wide-eyed at the Jimmie Rodgers Day Memorial Festival in Meridian, Mississippi, 1954: left to right, *Jerry Jericho, Ernest Tubb, and Johnny Bush.*

Festival. It was a big shindig in an airplane hangar. Tommy Duncan was there, Ernest Tubb, Hank Snow, and they all knew my uncle. Jerry introduced me to Ernest Tubb and Hank Snow. I'm in a suit and a big white hat I'd bought special for the occasion, scared out of my gourd in the presence of so many of my heroes.

That was the first time I'd seen Ray Price singing live. He knocked me out. I'd heard Ray Price on the radio in '52, but I'd never seen him. He was in a brown western suit, and what impressed me the most, he had two of the best-looking babes with him I'd ever seen, one on each arm. And he was high-rolling. He made up his eyes, just like Presley did, just like I do now. Hell, when you're my age, you need all the help you can get.

So in the same week I heard George Jones and Ray Price, two of the greatest country singers who ever lived, for the first time. Years later, I played the Jimmie Rodgers Memorial Festival as one of the headliners.

CRAZY ARMS

Now blue ain't the word for the way that I feel
Or the storm brewing in this heart of mine
This ain't no crazy dream, I know that it's real
You're someone else's love now, you're not mine

—"CRAZY ARMS," WRITTEN BY RALPH MOONEY,
RECORDED BY RAY PRICE

ONE SUNDAY NIGHT at Al's Country Club, this little red-headed guy came in carrying a guitar case, and he had this fiddle player with him. Back in those days, it was customary to ask people to sit in. The Mission City Playboys didn't have a fiddle player, and Dave really wanted to hire the fiddle player. But they were together, and they'd come in from Waco. So the kid got his guitar out. There was two kinds of guitar players: there were rhythm guitar players like me, and there were take-off guitar players. That meant you played lead. This kid was a good take-off guitar player.

His name was Willie Nelson. Dave hired both him and the fiddle player.

Willie and I soon became friends. He and his wife, Martha, rented a house on Labor Street in the south part of San Antone.

Big bad Martha. She was beautiful. She was about three-quarters Cherokee. Big old brown eyes. Slender, tall, jet black hair. But she had a temper that was unequaled by anything I've ever seen before or since, with the exception of my third wife.

I went over there one day, just jacking around. I was getting out of the car when the back door flew open and here come Willie in a dead run. I looked up, and this cast-iron pot seemed to be following him. He turned the corner, and that pot hit the garage. He looked up and saw me standing there. With that dry humor he's got, he said, "She loves me. You got a cigarette?"

So we went back inside. Thirty minutes later, Martha'd be laughing.

One night over there we pooled our money and fried some pork chops. And Willie had drunk a bottle of Mogen David wine. I barely drank anything back in those days. He just killed that bottle of wine, just like you would ice tea. That syrupy shit, you know. But it was cheap.

Martha kept trying to tell Jean and me something. And every time she'd start the story, Willie'd chime in. She said, "I told you to shut

Roommates: left to right, *Cosett Holland, Johnny Bush, and Willie Nelson, photographed at Walter's Ranch House, 1954.*

your mouth." He never even looked at her. He just kept talking. She said, "Willie, I said shut up." He just kept talking.

I'm getting a little nervous. She reaches over, takes a full piece of bread, comes through the gravy bowl with it, starts at his forehead, and goes all the way down his face. Gravy is dripping off his nose, and he never breaks his concentration on what he's telling me. He keeps talking. And I'm trying like hell not to laugh.

By this time, Martha is going ballistic. She picked up the fork she was eating with and went "chunk," right into his side. It stayed there! I said, "Jean, I think it's getting late. I got to get to work in the morning."

Another time I went over there, and outside I heard a little racket, so I just went on in. Looking down the hall, I could see Willie on his tiptoes, and he's going "unh . . . unh." Martha has his little finger in her jaw teeth, and she is clamping down. She's walking backwards, and he has to follow. He wanted to hit her, but he's afraid if he hit her, she'd a bit his finger off. So he didn't know what to do. His little finger is still numb to this day.

Martha would come to the joint and drink beer while we were playing. Hell, we was only getting six bucks a night. When we'd get off, Willie'd owe a couple of bucks to the bartender. She'd drink up his six

Mission City Playboys: left to right, *Dave Isbell, Johnny Bush, Willie Nelson, Cosett Holland, Carl Walker, Edwin "Frog" Isbell, 1954.*

dollars. Beer was like a quarter. That's a lot of beers. He'd owe the joint money.

Willie hadn't been in san antonio too long when he landed a job at KBOP nearby in Pleasanton. He was a disc jockey, he was a newscaster, he wrote copy, and he'd sell advertising when he was off. They were paying him like forty or forty-five dollars a week and we could play music on the weekends. The only problem was, he had to open up the radio station in the morning, like at 5:30 or whatever time sunrise was.

Willie was always pretty bright. He even went to Baylor [University] for a while. You couldn't tell it by looking at him or by some of his actions then, but he's a brilliant guy. His philosophy was, "I think of all the people that don't like me or are not buying my records. But then I look at the millions that haven't heard me yet." How you gonna keep a guy like that down? He could see the absurdity in everything. I think that's why we became friends, that sense of humor, laughing at each other, laughing at the absurdity of things. I thought he was funny, and apparently he thought I was funny, too.

Doc Parker, who owned KBOP, was a very intelligent human being. A humanitarian, world traveler. He took a great liking to Willie right off. Willie would pick his brain, and used a lot of the information later. Doc drove a beat-up old pickup and, hell, he was megabucks. Willie asked him, "Why do you drive that old piece of crap?" He said, "Can you imagine me going up to somebody, trying to sell some radio time while driving a Cadillac? These are country people. You gotta stay like the country folks." I think he was right.

For a short while it was Johnny Bush and the Hillbilly Playboys. I was the singer. Willie was the manager and played guitar. I'll never forget the time we had a job in Houston. I was staying at my mother's house, and I heard a noise in the middle of the night in the living room. I went out there and turned on the light. It was Willie, fumbling through the phone book, looking for the address to make sure he was in the right house! He could have got himself shot.

I have a demo tape of Willie's singing back then. When I first heard the tape, I made a remark to him that he's never forgotten, and he throws it up to my face to this day. I told him to stick to the guitar and not to try to sing. I didn't realize it at the time, but that really hurt his

Willie Nelson, KCNC radio personality, Fort Worth, circa 1954.

feelings, or pissed him off, whichever came first. You know, like anything I would say would matter anyway. Who the hell was I back then? But he never forgot it, and I've had to live with that comment. And if you heard the tape, you'd know exactly why I said it.

Willie began to be late at the station a lot. One day he told Mr. Parker, "If I'm late again, I won't be back." He was true to his word. One day he just didn't show up, and he never came back. Left his guitar with Doc, who had loaned him a little money. Mrs. Parker still has it.

One day I got a card from him. He was in Fort Worth, working a show every day on KCNC radio, and he was a real big wheel around town. Jean and I and my brother bought a new '54 Ford, and we went to Fort Worth to see Willie and Martha. He took me to the station. I was really impressed. The way he handled that mic, read the news, and played the records. He was always funny on the air.

He said, "Tonight, I'm gonna show you Fort Worth." First place we went to was the old Crystal Springs Dance Pavilion, where Bob Wills played when he started out. There was a swimming pool underneath the dance floor. I guess in the 1930s it was kind of a resort. Bonnie and Clyde even came to Crystal Springs.

We went from there to the stockyards. Every place we'd go, everybody knew him: "Hey Willie!" "Hey Willie!" He'd play guitar, and Martha would get more pissed by the minute: "That goddamned son of a bitch, I want to dance! I want him to sit here with me!" You know how it goes.

The next day Willie showed me some riffs on the guitar, and Mar-

tha come in and said, "Willie, put them goddamned guitars up so we can visit." He said, "Okay, in a minute." And then, he'd show me another riff, I'd practice it, and she'd repeat, "I said put them GODDAMNED guitars up. We've got company here!"

About that time I hear this whistling sound. She had picked up a bottle of Wild Root Cream Oil, you know, hair tonic, and she threw it at Willie. I ducked and it went past me, and she threw it so hard it went through the lampshade and knocked the bulb out. For a second, it was real, real quiet. And Willie goes, "Well, Johnny, I think I've had enough for the day. Y'all think that'll do it?"

JEAN LIKED WILLIE and she liked music, but she'd get pissed off whenever I'd lose a day job, which was pretty often. I thought of my dad and his dad. They were pressmen. I admired my dad so much, and I wanted to be like him, you know. Funny thing was, he wanted to be a musician. More or less, I believe I was my dad's alter ego. He was so proud of the fact that I could pick and sing and go out and get on the bandstand. Something he had always wanted to do but never did.

So we moved back to Houston, and I went to work at a print shop. It was boring, boring work. What I hated most was how the printer's ink gets under your fingers and into the pores of your skin. You can't get it off. After my dad retired, it was years and years before that printer's ink faded from his hands. I couldn't stay with that. I'd feel guilty: "What's wrong with me? I can't keep a job. Am I a worthless bastard?" But I just couldn't make myself go into that building every day, doing the same thing, day in and day out.

I was also feeling guilty because I was starting to run around on Jean a little bit. I think I have my Uncle Jerry partly to thank for that. When he ran around, he kept it in the closet pretty good, but he would encourage me to do it. I'm not blaming him for what I done. I knew it was wrong. But in those days that kind of behavior was encouraged. It was almost like it was part of the game. You're a musician, you got girlfriends in Dallas, and Fort Worth, Houston, Corpus Christi, and they come out, you know. You don't have to call them. They know where you're at, and they'd come out. It was part of the deal.

Today's stars can afford to take their families out with them. I went to see Tracy Byrd, one of the few current country singers whose voice I can recognize, at the stock show a few years ago. He called me and said to come on out so we could talk. There was a crib in the front

of his bus. I thought, "Wow! You know, that's a family man out on the road. Takes the babies with him."

Back in my day, we couldn't afford to do that. But if we had, maybe I wouldn't have had so much trouble.

In 1956, Jean and I bought our first house, in northeast Houston, so we didn't have to rent. In the short time we'd been married we'd lived in a dozen different places. We'd moved back to Houston because I could get better-paying day jobs. Also, most of my family was there. Jean just had her mom in San Antonio.

I started working in a band with a man in Houston named Danny Ross. His brother, Minor Ross, had a record label, Minor Records, and their first claim to fame was Claude Gray, a local hero around Houston who later had a hit with Willie's tune "Family Bible." I went to work for Danny Ross, playing the drums. The bass man was Tiny Smith. They called Tiny a "ton of fun," he was so big. He weighed around 450 pounds. He was a comedian, but a pretty good musician also. He had to sit down to play stand-up bass.

Tiny and I would do duo jobs at these little places. I'd be playing rhythm guitar, he'd be playing stand-up bass. Had a little microphone and one speaker, and we'd play for three and four hours at a time. I got a lot of training in learning to read a crowd, what would make them dance. You know, when to stop a tune and when to change a tempo from a slow song to a fast song. Crowd psychology, I call it.

We would work the West Beach in Galveston, where the highway just stopped. People would drive down to the beach and turn right and go for miles toward San Luis Pass on the beach. So they began to build these little beer joints out on the beach. He and I would play—sometimes I'd play guitar, then I'd play drums, depending on whether we had two or three pieces—from noon to midnight, Friday, Saturday, Sunday—for maybe seven to ten dollars apiece. It was just brutal.

This one place was built up on piers about eight feet off the beach. A fight would start, and people would run to the edge of the deck. One time this one guy beat the hell out of another guy, and the other guy got in the car and rolled the windows up. So the first guy picks up a 2x4 that drifted up on the beach and started ramming the other guy's windows and windshield. After that, everybody applauded and went back to their tables and sat down.

Tiny and I worked with Danny Ross at the Little York Club. The Little York Club was located on the corner of Little York Road and the north end of Jensen Drive, which is now Highway 59, or the Eastex

Freeway. You talk about a skull orchard. We worked in there Friday nights, Saturday nights, Sunday nights, New Year's Eve. Had a pretty good old band.

One night these two women that Danny Ross had known come in the Little York Club. All of a sudden their husbands come through the door. These two women went into the ladies' room and wouldn't come out. So these guys pulled up two chairs right in front of the ladies' room and just sat down with their arms folded. They turned the chairs around and waited for them to come out. They didn't go in to get them. They just waited.

Hell, we played two hours, two and a half hours. Danny was sweating bullets 'cause he'd been with both of them. Finally, we took a break. Behind the bar was a little room: sometimes they'd store cases of beer in there, sometimes we used it to change clothes. It was hot back there. Danny said, "Come go with me." So we went into the back room and we locked the door. It was closing time, and everybody left. And we heard them two women when they had to come out of the restroom. Them two guys beat them women nearly to death. I mean physically beat the living hell out of them. I felt bad that we couldn't do anything to help them, but Survival Rule No. 1 is that you don't come between a man and his wife when they're fighting. Ask any policeman. The guy that run the place—his name was R.A.—had called the sheriff's department. By the time a cop got out there, it was all over. The men and the women were gone. And the whole time Danny was sweating bullets 'cause he figured, well, he was going to be next.

ROCK AND ROLL was really coming on strong by this time. The only people keeping country music alive in 1956 were Ray Price, Marty Robbins, and Bobby Helms, with "Crazy Arms," "Singin' the Blues," and "Fraulein," respectively.

Marty switched over to pop with things like "A White Sport Coat and a Pink Carnation," the teenage-type thing, and Bobby Helms had a crossover hit with "You Are My Special Angel." Price refused to budge; he held the course. Like the Apostle Paul said, "I've stayed the course, I've kept the faith, I've fought a good fight." You could apply those words to Ray Price. He didn't waver with the rock crowd. Not even semiclose. Ray claims "Crazy Arms" was the first country shuffle. I don't know whether it was or not, but that's good enough for me.

Country music was suffering bad, bad, *bad* in the late fifties. It

The two sides of Johnny Bush: country singer (in hat and scarf, with guitar) and aspiring teen idol (in tuxedo), circa 1958.

wasn't getting to the young fans anymore. We were considered square. That word has always fascinated me: "square." It wasn't hip to dig country anymore. It was all about Elvis and Jerry Lee.

As a drummer, I was working pretty regular. It didn't matter to me whether it was rock and roll or country. Whatever the job called for, I could do. There's one thing about being a good drummer—you can always work 'cause every band has to have one. I'd get calls sometimes to do hotel jobs, where you'd have to wear a tux coat, a cummerbund, a bow tie. We would play the pop tunes, and people were all dressed up at the hotel, dancing to the beat of the kid from Kashmere Gardens with the mud on his shoes. Wow! Just like I'd dreamed about at the movies at the Queen Theater. There I was.

At this time, I was doing a free live radio show every Saturday from Channelview, on the east side of Houston. You could see the San Jacinto Monument from the shopping center where the station was. It was broadcast over KRCT, which became KIKK and moved to Pasadena. I was wearing my Lefty Frizzell fringe shirt with musical notes on it, had the flat-top Gibson guitar, singing Lefty Frizzell and Ray Price, and then we'd turn right around and I'd sing, "Well, that's all right mama / That's all right for you"—Elvis's first big hit.

We were doing it all. *American Bandstand* come on, and everybody started grooving on that. KILT went on the air as a rock-and-roll station and started having these sock hops all over Houston. They played records, and the kids would do what Dick Clark was doing on TV. Danny Ross and I played a lot of those sock hops. We were still country, but we were playing that type of music. We just wanted to *happen*. Just wanted to happen, you know.

Still, I couldn't believe that some people preferred the new sound over country. Why couldn't they like both? Chuck Berry's "Maybellene"? That's a country song. And the stuff Jerry Lee was doing, and Elvis, too. That was country. You didn't hear a fiddle or a steel, but it was country. It's easy to hear it now. But the rock-and-roll crowd then would put country down. And country people like my uncle, Jerry Jericho, he hated rock and roll so bad. He looked at Elvis and Jerry Lee like I look at Marilyn Manson today.

If you'll remember, this is when Pat Boone and Ricky Nelson started covering some of these black artists like Little Richard, who the white disc jockeys wouldn't play because they were black. Fats Domino was the first to break that mold. But before he did, Pat Boone and Ricky Nelson were covering him to the white market. Chuck Berry was making great music, but it wasn't being played on white stations till finally them walls started coming down.

When I was growing up in Houston, blacks sat at the back of the bus. It was 1956, I think, before they could sit where they wanted to. I once heard Doc Severinsen talk about traveling through the South with a big band, checking into hotels where the black musicians couldn't stay at the same hotel as the whites. But I think musicians erased that color line long before anybody else did. In my opinion, good music doesn't know color.

It was around this time that I met Bill Freeman, a steel player in Houston. Bill was a dispatcher for Brown Truck Lines who wanted to be a promoter. He had a band called the Texas Plainsmen. He would contact a name that didn't cost a hell of a lot of money, and he would book a ten-day tour around southeast Texas, put the band together, promote it, and play the gig. He was trying to get something going. I was all for it. Some of the acts that we worked with included Jerry Jericho, Ted Daffan, and Hank Locklin, who had just joined the Opry at that time, but he was still living in Houston.

*Bill Freeman (*left*) and the Texas Plainsmen, backing Jerry Jericho (*third from left*) at Houston's Shamrock Hilton Hotel, 1957, featuring Johnny Bush (*fourth from left*).*

Playing with the Texas Plainsmen is how I met Moon Mullican and spent ten days with the master. I got to see how great the guy really was: piano player, entertainer, singer, songwriter. Moon was rockabilly before they invented the term.

Moon had a Fender Bassman amp, and he had his own pickup—a rubber-looking thing—and he would wedge it somewhere in the mid-range behind the piano soundboard to try to pick up as much of the lows, highs, and mids as he could. There was no electric pianos back in those days, and he had to play whatever piano was in the hall. Well, these old halls . . . They were made out of scraps. The roofs leaked. Can you imagine those old pianos he had to play? The ivory was coming loose, and some of the keys didn't work at all, and he had to carry a tuning hammer with him to get the piano as close as he could. It would have to tune to him because there'd be no way to get the damn piano in four-forty pitch. There'd be no way. Well, Moon was pretty old then. But he was just terrific.

He was friendly, too. He was riding with us one night, and it was cold. The heater was blowing, old Pontiac heater on the floor, you

know, just blowing up. And he was drinking vodka straight, and he'd chase it with 7 Up. He'd pick that vodka bottle up and take three or four good pulls off of it. He had that 7 Up sitting on the floorboard, holding it with his foot—you know, where the transmission well is—so it wouldn't fall over. He reached down there and picked up that 7 Up and just spit it all over the dash and the windshield, then he rolled the window down and finished spitting it out. He looked at me and said, "Damn, I hate hot 7 Up." Hot vodka didn't bother him at all, but that hot 7 Up, that was too much.

One day Bill Freeman told me there was a man from All Star Records in town. He said, "They want a record out on you." And I said, "Man, that's great!"

This was 1957 or '58. This man, Dan Mature, I think his name was, had a record company. He was Polish or German or Czech or a mixture of all three. He had a strong accent. People would write songs and send them in with a check to get their songs recorded. They would pay somebody to record their songs! Well, I was perfect for this gig. The only drawback was, the material stunk. Can you imagine how bad a song would be if somebody had to pay to have it recorded? "Here's my song, here's $500. I want to hear it on record." Couldn't be much of a song.

So we went in the studio: my first recording session. Had a good drummer, Dee Newton. Had a good guitar, Junior Beck. Fred Gorie was on steel, and a great musician, Pete Burke Jr., was on five-string upright bass. At that time he was on the road with Hank Thompson and the Brazos Valley Boys and Billie Gray and the Western Okies.

I cut four sides. The titles aren't important; they were terrible songs. But the music was good—kind of a rockabilly-R&B thing. Had the Jerry Lee Lewis–type piano on it. One of the songs even had some doo-wop singing on it. That's what I wanted to do then 'cause country wasn't happening, and we wanted to happen.

We weren't the only ones. Red Foley tried to cut a rock-and-roll version of "Hearts Made of Stone." They even had Ernest Tubb do something like that: "What am I living for, if not for you." Oh, it was awful, not like ET at all. And here come Jim Reeves, threw away his Nudie suits and starts dressing like Elvis. Even Marty Robbins, with his talent, he tried to cover "That's All Right, Mama." Can you imagine that? Tried to compete with Presley. And Johnny Cash and Johnny

Horton went to the blazers and the ties. Not only was the music changing, the clothes were changing.

So I recorded those songs and got no airplay at all, but the label was happy because they got their check up front. The musicians were happy because they got paid. And I was happy 'cause I had a record out . . . "Hey, look, I got a record out! Put it on the jukebox."

Guess where we recorded it? At the old Peacock Studios on Liberty Road, the southern end of Kashmere Gardens. No matter what I do, I can't seem to get out of Kashmere Gardens. By this time, the whole place was black. Black engineer, everything. But it was probably the best studio in Houston at that time. Johnny Ace had recorded there. Laverne Baker had recorded there, and Bobby "Blue" Bland. And a guy who I later became great friends with named Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. He recorded there.

Like I told you, we'd been listening to black stations for a long time in Houston, the underground black stations, at night. One of the strongest radio programs just before Presley, the deejay's name was Dizzy Lizzy, on KYOK, and that was strictly a black format—black deejay, black music. She would play all the records that these white guys were covering. Her theme song was Gatemouth Brown's "Okie Dokie Stomp." She'd play Fats Domino, Little Richard, where the mainstream rock-and-roll stations in town were not playing it. They were playing Pat Boone and Ricky Nelson and the other guys that was covering these great records. Imagine Pat Boone trying to cover Little Richard? It was idiotic.

MY DAY GIG AT THIS TIME was at the print shop in the Shamrock Hilton Hotel. Glenn McCarthy, an old wildcatter in the oil business, built the Shamrock after he got drunk one night and was thrown out of the Rice Hotel. I've read stories about him cruising South Main at 100 miles an hour in a brand-new Cadillac with a four-carat diamond on his hand and a bottle of Jack Daniels between his legs. He was one of my heroes.

A couple of guys who worked for the PR firm that had its office there would give me advice from time to time. I was putting together a brochure on me—you know, "a man of many talents"—and one of these guys said, "On your publicity shots, if it's just you, nobody knows who in the hell you are, right?" I said, "You got that right." He said, "But if I put a guitar in your hand or a microphone, I know you're either

a guitar player or a singer. So have something in that picture that tells me not just who you are, but what you are."

And I was taking all of this down, but I couldn't get that damn printer's ink off of my hands. Every day when I'd print the menus, I'd go down from the print shop, through the lobby of the Shamrock, and look for movie stars. One time I saw Hugh O'Brien, who played Wyatt Earp on TV. To a kid, you know, that was exciting. I'd wear real nice clothes to work, put on a shop coat to keep that damn printer's ink from getting on my clothes. Couldn't get it off my hands, but when I took the menus down to the lobby, I'd be looking good. I'd take my smock off, put the sport coat on. I'd be looking *good*.

Then one night they passed an order: no more print shop riffraff in the lobby; go through the basement. I was crushed because I was proud to be part of the Shamrock thing. For my Christmas bonus, I got a check signed by Conrad Hilton. I should've kept it, but I was so broke. I thought, "One day, one day . . . the day will come." I always knew something was going to happen. It couldn't help but happen. I wanted it so bad. I just didn't know how to make it happen.

Years later, after I'd had four Top Ten songs, my second wife and I and another couple couldn't find a motel room anywhere in Houston. I said, "I got an idea." I drove up to the Shamrock Hilton in a brand-new Cadillac, threw open both doors, and went inside. Said, "I want two rooms. Whatever you've got, I'll take them." Took my keys and threw them to the bellboy. I'm in Levis and boots. Had my hat on, and I was wearing a two-carat diamond pinkie ring like Glenn McCarthy.

I was having a big time! My wife said, "What in the hell's the matter with you. You've never been rude before like this. Now straighten up!" I was embarrassing her, throwing my weight around, telling the guy how to carry my suitcase. But I was getting even: "Tell me I can't come through this fuckin' lobby. I'll show your ass!" Of course this was years later, and nobody working there had been around back then. Not to mention that the new Cadillac was financed and the pinkie ring belonged to somebody else. But I have to admit it felt good.

In 1958, Jean got pregnant. While my wife was pregnant, I didn't trifle. I felt like that would really be a rotten thing to do. It never dawned on me that I shouldn't be trifling at all, father-to-be or not.

We had a Christmas party at the Shamrock, just a couple of months before my baby was born, and Jean was really pregnant. This girl who

worked on the same floor as I did asked for a ride home. I gave her a ride, I swear that's all it was. She got out of the car; I went home. Two or three days later I come home one night to have dinner, and I sat down at the table to eat, and there were a couple of cigarette butts in my plate with lipstick on them. And Jean said, "Where did these come from?" At that moment, 'cause I knew I hadn't been screwing around, I couldn't imagine where they come from. So I asked her, "Where'd you get 'em?" She said, "Out of the ashtray of the car." So I told her the truth about the girl, and she became extremely jealous.

My daughter was born March 26, 1959. Heights Hospital. She was the prettiest baby I'd ever seen and still is. We named her Gaye, Gaye Lynn.

I'd been laid off from my day job at the Shamrock because they were cutting the workforce down. By then things had started changing. They closed the Emerald Room and the International Room. Everything was scaling down. I was the low man on the totem pole, so I got laid off. Not fired—laid off, which is why I wish I would have kept that Christmas bonus check signed by Conrad Hilton.

I thought I had a pretty good prospect of becoming a disc jockey at a radio station in San Antonio. So I put Jean and the baby in the car. And what little belongings we had, I had them put in a storage truck and moved them to San Antone. I remember driving this old '56 green Chevrolet with no air-conditioning, headed out Highway 90 toward San Antonio. Crossed Post Oak Road kind of looking back in the mirror, like Mac Davis later sang about "looking back on Lubbock, Texas in my rearview mirror." And I knew in my heart I wouldn't be back in Houston to live again.

It wasn't a sad moment. It was almost jubilant. I was glad. Cranked up the radio and there was Lefty singing "Long Black Veil."

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NIGHT LIFE

But the night life
Ain't no good life
But it's my life

—"NIGHT LIFE," WRITTEN AND RECORDED BY WILLIE NELSON

WHEN I FIRST FOUND OUT that my wife was pregnant, I was overjoyed because I've always loved kids and to have one of my own was going to be just great. But I fell victim to the what-ifs: "What if she's not healthy? What if she's born dead? What if I can't provide for her? I'm bringing a life into this world. I'm going to be responsible for her for the rest of my life. I haven't even been able to take care of myself like I should."

Ever since I was a kid, I had suffered from occasional panic attacks. The panic attacks now became so ferocious that I had to go to the doctor. I'd be so consumed by fear that it destroyed my appetite. I couldn't sleep, started losing weight. You see somebody coming after you with a gun or a knife, that's fear, but you know why. But what if you're having this

fear and there's no reason for it? Then the adrenaline starts pumping and the panic . . . They didn't have a name for panic attacks back then. I never heard that word till the '90s. I thought I was flipping out, losing my mind. I thought, "This is the way a crazy person does." I was trying to describe depression, you know, and I didn't know how.

What helped me the most was when my doctor explained to me that a crazy person is quite happy being unrealistic or seeing things, and they're not upset by it at all. He said, "You're a singer, you're a musician, you're a poet, you're a songwriter. People like you are very sensitive. Writers, any kind of people with any artistic ability, are supersensitive people." He said, "Things will affect you that won't affect somebody else." And he said, "I can give you some tranquilizers, but I don't think you need them."

I said, "Yeah, but why not? This is more of an emotional-type thing. It's the opposite of being in love." He said, "That's why some people drink."

It's true that whenever I'd start feeling panicked, a few belts would make me feel a lot better. Another old doctor of mine said that alcohol is one of the greatest medicines ever invented. And I have to agree with him, even though it's going to piss a lot of people off. I don't know about anybody else, but if I'm in a bad mood, it puts me in a better frame of mind.

Of course, I've seen it have an adverse effect on a lot of people. I've seen happy-go-lucky people have a few drinks, and, man, you can't be in the same fucking room with them. All I know is how it does me. I'm a happy drunk. I feel better. I can be mad at you, but if I'm drunk, oh, hell, I'm going to love you. To me, it's great medicine.

I used to think I couldn't get onstage without some kind of buzz going. Just before I went back to San Antonio, I played Tin Hall one time with Doc Lewis, the old Texas Playboys piano player. It was 1959. My daughter was just a baby. First time I'd ever been to Tin Hall. I couldn't understand how that big old dance hall had been out there in the farm country northwest of Houston that long without me knowing about it. Tin Hall is over 130 years old.

I took a bottle of Thunderbird with me. I couldn't afford anything else. I just never was a big beer drinker, and I couldn't afford whiskey. But T-bird would get you there for seventy-five cents. We got out there, and the old man that was overseeing Tin Hall said, "I don't allow musicians to drink."

I said, "What about intermission?" He said, "No. You don't drink

AT ALL. Do you have a day job?" "Yes sir." "Do you drink on your day job?" "No sir." "Well, you don't drink out here."

So I asked Doc Lewis. He said, "That's right. No drinking." He had a thermos bottle on the piano. I thought he was drinking coffee. He was drinking bourbon and coke. The son of a bitch wouldn't even tell me. We played four hours without a break. Finally, at the intermission, we went out to the car, and the old bastard we were working for followed me out with a flashlight. Can you imagine?

MY WIFE'S MAMA, BOBBIE, was always on my side. She always promoted the idea of me becoming a professional entertainer because at one time when she was younger she'd played piano with Milton Brown, the original singer of the Light Crust Doughboys with Bob Wills, who had died in an auto accident just as Texas swing music was becoming very popular. So she kind of *knew*. For her, anything that would keep me involved with the music one way or another was good 'cause I wasn't worth a damn in a day job.

I used to write down the four major record companies: Columbia, Decca, RCA, Capitol. And I used to think, which one is finally gonna sign me? I might have been working as an electrician, delivery-truck driver, in a sheet-metal shop, whatever. But that was always on my mind. Which of these companies was going to sign me? It was as if I could look into the future and I knew one day it was going to happen. But I didn't know how I was gonna get to that point. In *Last Train to Memphis* by Peter Guralnick, Elvis mentioned that same feeling two or three times. He *knew*. Willie said he always knew. Haggard and Lefty Frizzell, all these guys I've been reading about, had that same sense that something would happen.

I thought being a disc jockey would keep me in music, keep me on top of things, and I could still play. It had worked for Willie.

KMAC was the big country station in San Antonio. Charlie Walker, the biggest country disc jockey in the world, was on KMAC. Jim Reeves, Webb Pierce, Hank Snow—they became good friends of his because they wanted their records played. Ray Price got Charlie Walker a Columbia recording contract. And Harlan Howard wrote Charlie's first hit, "Pick Me Up on Your Way Down." It was the nation's number 1 hit.

Charlie Walker had a nightclub in the early fifties called The Barn. Because he was also a disc jockey and had this club, he could promote an act for nothing on his show. He'd book Ray Price for seventy-five

dollars coming through. He booked Hank Williams for, like, seven hundred. He could promote these acts from his show, and the station wouldn't say anything to him because half the time Mr. Davis, who owned the station, didn't pay him. Sometimes he'd be three or four months in arrears getting a paycheck, but he made his money out of The Barn and by doing personal appearances.

When Charlie Walker went off in the afternoon, Aaron Allen would come on. Aaron was a songwriter with a great radio voice, and he kind of took me under his wing. At night I'd go down there, and he'd teach me how to read copy. When it came time to audition for a job on the FM side at KISS, I got before the microphone and they said, "Okay, read this copy. We'll see what you sound like." It so happened that the copy they gave me was the same copy that Aaron and I had been practicing for months. Hell, I could've recited it without looking at it.

I got the gig. KISS is now a big rock radio station in town, but back then hardly anybody was listening to FM. Mostly it was elevator-type music. It was three hours a night, and they paid a buck an hour. But the hours would've been from nine to midnight, and that would have killed my playing gigs. And I could make ten dollars a night somewhere playing drums as opposed to the three bucks I could make there at the radio station. So I didn't take the gig, and my career in radio was over before it began.

I'm thinking, "What in the hell am I gonna do?" I'm twenty-four, twenty-five years old. I don't have any money, but I've got a lot of irons in the fire. I've got a press clipping that my wife, Jean, clipped out and saved. It's from a column called "Around the Plaza" in the old *San Antonio Light*. It describes me as "country pop singer Johnny Bush, who is also an accomplished jazz drummer and drum teacher."

I was trying to sing and become a performer, but the drums kept me working. It was a natural talent. That day the drummer didn't show up at the Texas Star Inn and old Frank Kline, who didn't know a good drummer from a bad drummer, said, "OK, Johnny, you play drums," the tempo must have been like a roller coaster. But it came natural to me. I worked with good drummers like Dee Newton, and I would listen to Paul McGee on Hank Thompson records, how he would accent with his right foot and right hand. It came easy for me, and the first thing you knew, I was the hottest drummer in San Antone. I thought, "Well, I better stick with this for a while."

A retired Air Force drummer named Chuck Springer taught me a lot. He taught me to read the rudiments and how to play a drum roll.

He taught me how to play triplets. And how when you took a test and the teacher said to play a nine-stroke roll, there'd be a piece of carbon paper on top of a piece of paper and there had better be nine dots on that paper or you didn't play a nine-stroke roll. For some reason, timing and tempo came real natural to me. I could play a five-stroke roll, a nine-stroke roll, the triplet. What they cannot teach you is how to hold and maintain the tempo, which is what a drummer has to do. Whoever counts it off, you hold that tempo no matter what.

Up to that time, I thought the drummer just played along with the band. The band plays with the drummer. You tune them out, which is hard to do because, man, you might be really diggin' what they're doing, especially in a recording session. You've got to tune them out and concentrate on holding the tempo. This is something nobody can teach you. You can't teach meter and you can't teach tempo and you can't teach taste.

I always try to give a different sound to each instrument. A steel man usually likes to be rode heavy with a ride cymbal. When the piano comes in, I would soften with a closed high hat, keep that afterbeat going, but to where you could hear what the piano man was doing. Fiddle man, the same way. Lead guitar, give him probably the same sound, only not as dramatic as you would the steel player. So I had different sounds for different instruments. You are to complement what they're doing. Drums are to be felt and not heard. That took a long time to learn.

I started to get called by bands when their regular drummer couldn't make it. Back then, there weren't very many drummers, period. See, it's hard to practice drums. Drums are loud. You have neighbors. I had to practice so it didn't make noise. Some drummers play on a pillow, and it strengthens your hands because if you play on a pillow you have to pick that stick up and you can't rely on the bounce. When you learn the rudiments playing on a pillow, it strengthens your hands, plus there's no noise.

On the days when I had time, I began playing a little golf with Charlie Walker, and we became friends. What a frustrating thing that game is. Such a challenge, really. I love it to this day. Charlie Walker was a scratch golfer. I'm still a 90s player. Several years ago I broke a 90 maybe three or four times. I never have shot in the 70s.

ONE DAY I GOT A CALL FROM DON PACK, the pedal-steel player. He had a band called the Western Downbeats that was the

The Western Downbeats: left to right, *Don Pack, Bill Gillis, Dow Daggett, Harry Pack, James Atwood, and Johnny Bush (holding drum). San Antonio, 1961.*

swingingest band in town. I think it would still be considered good today. Instrumentally, it ranked with Hank Thompson's band. It was steel, lead guitar, fiddle, piano, bass, drums, and sax. We would play all the military installations, of which there were five around San Antonio. Four of them were Air Force bases, and they all had an NCO men's club and an enlisted men's club. This was back in the days when the government allotted so much money to these clubs for entertainment, it didn't matter if you had a crowd or not. They didn't care. The money was there, spend it. That kept us going, plus we worked the Cabaret Club in Bandera on Saturday night, and sometimes we'd make as much as twelve dollars a man. That was a fortune back in those days.

The Western Downbeats wore western shirts with Texan clip-on ties. We had black pants and either a checkered shirt or a white shirt with a black tie, and gray or black hats. In the summertime it was a turquoise short-sleeve shirt with a red tie. We looked sharp. It was hillbilly jazz, you know, western swing. We thought we were pretty hot shit.

The problem with the Western Downbeats was that we didn't have a regular singer. Everybody would periodically sing songs. I was doing several songs from the drums, but we didn't have a strong front

man at all. The guitar player, Dow Daggett, knew a couple of Bob Wills songs, and I was doing Elvis from the drums. That's why I don't think the band really took off.

But we had instrumental arrangements that would kill you. "String of Pearls" and "Lil' Liza Jane" would just knock your hat off. But nobody seemed to care but us.

We played at Lackland Air Force Base one afternoon, and this lady said, "Look, guys, if I'd pay you all right now, would you please leave?" This bad rock-and-roll band came up there and just filled the place up. People were dancing. Everybody in the band got pissed off.

This is where musical snobbery began to come in. We were diggin' Dave Brubeck and Stan Kenton and George Shearing. You know, *jazz*. As Willie said one time, there's nothing worse than a conceited hillbilly.

My wife's boss, Winston Peterson, was with Thermal Supply, an air-conditioning supply company. He was kind of an entrepreneur. He liked to diversify. One time he booked Stan Kenton, June Christy, and the Four Freshmen. What a show! He gave us free tickets, and we got to go backstage. Stan Kenton and that big orchestra, my gosh! June Christy and the Freshmen, what harmony they sang! I thought, "This is good. How come country can't be good like this?" I almost fell victim to becoming a musical snob myself. I couldn't get it through my head that you could like all kinds of music.

"You're not still listening to that cornball country crap are you?" the guys in the band would ask me. Secretly, I was. Late at night, my wife and I would turn on these all-night country stations, and there was a lot of them back then. You could get WSM from Nashville after midnight. You could get WHO out of Des Moines, Iowa. You could get XEG out of Fort Worth. The studio was in Fort Worth, but the transmitter was across the border in Monterrey, Mexico. XERF out of Del Rio; their transmitter was also across the border, in Acuña, Mexico, and the FCC couldn't regulate the wattage, so they could just boom the signal as much as they wanted to. You could buy everything from flower and vegetable seeds to live baby chicks and goat glands (advertised as a cure for impotence) on this radio station. Wolfman Jack got his start there.

There was a guy out of Fort Worth on XEG, Uncle Hank Craig. He and Willie were good friends. His theme song was "The Orange Blossom Special." He would play a song, and before he would speak, you would hear a little bit of "Orange Blossom Special." It was a real tight show. No dead air.

And he started playing Johnny Cash's album *Ride This Train*. Johnny Cash was as country as cornflakes, you know? And *Ride This Train* was just one of the greatest things I'd ever heard. I was mesmerized by how good it was. Not so much his singing; God knows there's better singers. But the way he was putting it all together and his phrasing. And sometimes the guy would play the whole album.

I couldn't tell my buddies or they'd laugh me out of court: "You listen to Johnny Cash?" But as far as I know, this was the first concept album that was ever recorded. You could hear the train going in the background, a steam locomotive. You can hear the whistle behind his narration. It went something like this:

> You see that levee over there, mister? That wasn't made with machinery. That was made by blood, sweat, and raw muscle. One night I was over there in Memphis having a few drinks and somebody blew out the light and ran over a dead man. Next thing I knew they had my ankle tied to a chain.

There was this wild piano. And you could hear the blacks in the background: "Yeah, goin' to Memphis, Lawd, goin' to Memphis."

It was right around this time that Johnny Cash came to San Antonio to take part in a benefit for Carrie Rodgers, Jimmie Rodgers's widow, that was being hosted by Charlie Walker. Everybody who was anybody was on that show. I went with my uncle, Jerry Jericho, who was one of the invited guests. We went backstage. Johnny Cash was sitting on a table talking to Hawkshaw Hawkins. When he saw my uncle, Cash called out to him and shook his hand. He said he was a fan of my uncle's records, especially "Ragged But Right." Uncle Jerry said, "Johnny Cash, I would like for you to meet my nephew, Johnny Bush." We shook hands. That's the only time I ever met him. Boy, was I impressed. Cash later cut a tune written by Eddie Noack called "These Hands" that had originally been recorded by my uncle at Ted Daffan's studio in Houston. He was still doing the tune on his shows up until he quit performing.

Every night I'd turn it to Uncle Hank Craig, trying to hear some more of that stuff. One of those nights, I'm diggin' it, and I hear Willie singing "Night Life." Hadn't heard from Willie in a few years. He'd recorded "Night Life" on the RX label, like at the drugstore, RX for prescription. He sang "Night Life" with a saxophone lead. This was way before Ray Price cut it. I said, "Honey, that's Willie!" And she said, "Damned sure

is." And this guy was really praising Willie, saying he was going to be one of the biggest songwriters in the world. He called him a great stylist. And I thought, "Where can I find Willie to let him know that this guy is really on his record?" I had no idea where to find him. I guess he was in Houston at that time, 'cause I think that's where he cut the record.

So I'm diggin' cash and playing western swing jazz drums, but I'm still wanting to sing.

I took another job in a little print shop over on Brooklyn Avenue in San Antonio. It didn't last long, and I never worked in a print shop again. I had the radio blasting one day so loud to get over all that noise, and guess what was playing? Marty Robbins's "El Paso." Fabulous! It had to be four minutes long. As far as I know, "El Paso" was the first hit song that ran that long. Program directors want songs under three minutes so they can program more commercials. All the deejays would laugh and say that "El Paso" was their piss break. But what a beautiful, beautiful thing it was. I had bought a stereo and joined the Columbia Record Club. I ordered Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter* album with "El Paso" on it, and Johnny Cash's *Ride This Train*. Stereophonic sound just knocked me out when it was new. I thought it was gonna revolutionize the sound, which it did. From mono to stereo, it was a giant step.

The Western Downbeats weren't working that many jobs. Don Pack got me on at this music store, Caldwell Music, where he was teaching beginner guitar, and I started teaching beginner drums and beginner guitar. I couldn't read notes, but Don got me the beginner guitar book, taught me the first lesson, and I stayed one lesson ahead of my students. I was also selling drums as well as teaching. It kept some money coming in.

Sometimes after a gig, me and a bunch of the guys would go out to the Eastwood Country Club on the east side of San Antonio. This was a black joint, you know. But everybody was welcome. At that time in Texas there was no liquor by the drink. They'd give you a coffee cup, and after hours everybody had a bottle under the table.

The main act there was a black lady they called Miss Wiggles. She was in her sixties, but she was built like Raquel Welch. She looked good. She would stand on her head on an armchair, and she would make the chair do a 360, all the way around, to the time of the music.

There was also a big band—full rhythm section and lots of brass—

that played for dancers. That was the first time I'd seen people dancing apart from each other on the dance floor, expressing themselves. In a country joint, you couldn't get a cigarette paper between you and your partner. That was the whole idea, wasn't it? Belly rubbing.

Sometimes, this band would feature a guitar player I mentioned earlier named Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown. He used a capo on the neck of his guitar, and he played rock-and-roll guitar. Sometimes he'd play "Okie Dokie Stomp" for twenty minutes. On the breaks, he'd come over and sit with us, and we'd go out and blow a joint and talk about music. He was into all kinds of music, just like I was, but we'd talk about jazz.

We invited him to our jam sessions on Sunday afternoon at a place called Music Land, and he'd come and sit in. He'd be the only black guy there. Hell, everybody loved him. This was 1960 or '61, years before San Antonio was integrated officially, if it is today.

Like I said, real musicians have always been color-blind.

In 1959 and '60, they were filming *The Alamo*, John Wayne's epic, in Alamo Village in Brackettville, west of San Antonio. After the filming, there was gonna be a lot of private wrap parties, and the Western Downbeats were the only band around that had musicians who could read music. We were hired to play this reception at this shopping center for all the stars of the movie. San Antonio had been in a seven-year drought. Medina Lake was a mud puddle.

Come the night of the world premiere of *The Alamo* at the old Woodline Theater, it rained for two days and two nights. It was horrible. The turnout was horrible; the review of the film was horrible. Critics kept saying, who wants to go see a movie where you already know the ending? I loved the movie, still do. I watch it maybe once a month. There's a lot of guys in it I knew personally.

Anyway, we were to play the shopping center. All the stars were to show up. San Antonio was gonna greet the stars of *The Alamo*. They sent us the score. We played the background music from the movie. Learned "Green Leaves of Summer." Beautiful melody, written by Dmitri Tiomkin.

So this car pulls up. John Wayne jumps out, crowd goes crazy. Richard Widmark gets out, and he's real arrogant. Richard Boone, Mr. *Have Gun Will Travel*, who played Sam Houston in the movie. Linda Cristal, beautiful girl. Chill Wills, that old drunk bastard, insulting

everybody. All of them come up to the bandstand while we're playing these themes. Chill Wills was campaigning for a best supporting actor Oscar nomination, and he's throwing out pictures of himself.

John Wayne was a prince. The night came off without a hitch, and we got a lot of good press. The next day, I thought to myself, "John Wayne got this close to my arm: not too bad for a kid from Kashmere Gardens." Looked down to see if that mud was still on my shoes. A little disappointed there wasn't, but only for a moment.

Coming back from Bandera every Saturday night, Don Pack would search for these country stations I was telling you about. Hank Locklin had a song called "Please Help Me, I'm Falling" on RCA Records, Chet Atkins playing guitar. Man, it was great. Buck Owens was just sliding under the door with "Above and Beyond," with Ralph Mooney playing steel guitar; a totally different steel-guitar sound than we were used to in Texas. Country music was still happening!

Although I liked some of the Nashville sound and the music coming out of Bakersfield, California, where Buck was from, I knew there was a difference between that music and the way we played country music in Texas. A good Texas band had to be able to play both western swing and country. Bob Wills never associated his music with Nashville or hillbilly music. I've got several live recordings where Bob talks to people interviewing him about western swing. He says, "Well, all we were trying to do was make a living."

But what Bob Wills and Leon McAuliffe and those guys were doing, besides writing their own songs, was playing jazz, pop, and blues for country audiences. Bob loved the blues, Bessie Smith and people like that. I figured it out, the reason why Bob Wills hated the word "hillbilly." It got in the way of him trying to make a living.

Of course, everybody knows Bob's story, how he came up playing house dances with his father. When I was young, I went to several house dances. They would move all the furniture out of a room, and they would play the guitar and fiddle, and people would dance. They wouldn't go to a beer joint or a honky-tonk. That was a bad place to be. They'd have their own thing at their own house. There was no amplification. Bob said he wore out countless fiddle bows trying to be heard, playing hard.

His instrumentation in the beginning was stringed instruments, long before he hired the horns. They would learn pop and jazz songs to

play at their dances on stringed instruments. They were doing all types of popular songs of the day with those kinds of "country" instruments at these dances. They weren't trying to be creative. They were trying to make money to buy food.

Some of the jazz musicians out of New York were grooving on Bob Wills, and some of them would leave Harry James and Benny Goodman and come to work with the Texas Playboys. Bob was drawing a big crowd, especially after he added the horn section. But Bob would become paranoid. Bob would think he wasn't a great musician, and when he'd drink, he'd think these guys were making fun of him. And that's when he'd fire people. When he'd get drunk, he'd stay drunk for two or three weeks at a time.

I don't think he ever realized how great he was, but Bob had an attitude. For instance, at a recording session a guy told Bob he was playing out of meter. And Bob said, "Well, how so?" The guy said, "Well, musically, if I want to write this down for you, what you're playing is out of meter." And Bob's comment was, "Well, son, if God hadda written the first music, I'd agree with you. But it was a man that wrote the first music, and who's to say I'm not smarter than he was?" How could you argue with that? But the guy was right. I don't know how some of those drummers played with him. Someone else goes off on a fiddle breakdown, and measures stop and begin. But not Bob: he just plays.

A lady by the name of Clarice, or something like that, was running the Cabaret Club in Bandera at that time. She called me one day and said, "Johnny? I've got a band coming in Saturday night, but they don't have a drummer. Could you please come play for them?" I said, "Well, what does it pay?" She said, "What've I been paying you all up here on Saturday night?" I said, "Twelve dollars." She said, "I can give you twelve dollars."

She didn't tell me who the band was. It was Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys! I get up there, and everybody was there but the old man. He was a no-show. Tommy Duncan, who had recently reunited with Wills, was there, Jack Lloyd, Gene Crownover, Glenn Rhees. Tommy Duncan walked over. Had on a blue serge suit, big white hat. I had so much respect for him, you know? He said, "Kid, don't get too nervous. Bob's not here, and we're not gonna do any of the hard stuff tonight. Just cool it and play along."

I felt like he was talking down to me. I loved Tommy Duncan. He was one of my heroes, and I was knocked out that they all liked

my playing. But in all honesty, except for the vocals, the Western Downbeats were as good a band as the Playboys at that time. I was just young and arrogant enough not to realize that could've been a big night for me to play with the Texas Playboys, even though Bob wasn't there.

BY THIS TIME, my wife had become so involved with our child that she lived and breathed that baby. We both loved Gaye. But my wife became so involved in being a good mother, she became cold to me. And I can't remember how it worked out like this, but somehow my wife had her own bedroom with the baby, and all of a sudden I had my own room, my own closet, and my own entryway to the driveway. So I'm like a single man living in a boarding house.

She lost all interest in sex, and these were my horny years, man. I'm in my midtwenties and playing these joints and seeing all these pretty gals. I'm not saying that her attitude toward me and sex and being a wife was all her fault. She focused entirely on being a good mother. I was working full time at the music store and playing at night. I would've rather had it that way than to have her running around and neglecting the baby. But she just turned off to me. And I began to resent it.

About that time, Billy Western, a big country-music promoter, called and wanted me to do ten days on a package tour with Johnny Horton. Johnny Horton just had "The Battle of New Orleans" out, biggest song in the country. I played drums on the package, but not behind Horton. Horton had three pieces, like Johnny Cash did: Tommy Tomlinson on guitar, Tillman Franks on bass, Johnny Horton. They wore red blazers, black pants, and black patent-leather shoes. No western clothes.

My job was to play drums behind my uncle Jerry Jericho, James O'Gwynn, (a Houston boy who had a song on the charts then), and a group called the Gays, two brothers who married twin sisters. The sisters later became the Kimberlys, who recorded "MacArthur Park" with Waylon Jennings.

When I came home after that ten days, I was looking forward to a sexual reunion. Couldn't wait to get home. When I arrived, Jean was wearing shorts and sandals. I've always been a foot man: I love pretty feet. Also pretty legs and pretty butts, pretty everything else. She was wearing sandals, and she looked so nice, smelled so good. And she was always built great, had a great body. But it was, "Not tonight. I'm too tired."

I've just driven from Austin. I've been gone ten days. I thought she must not love me at all.

That night at the Western Downbeats gig in Bandera, this good-looking gal showed up who was friends with Don and Harry Pack, two of the guys in the band. Her name was Janice. Don and Harry introduced her to me. We just drove around Bandera and talked.

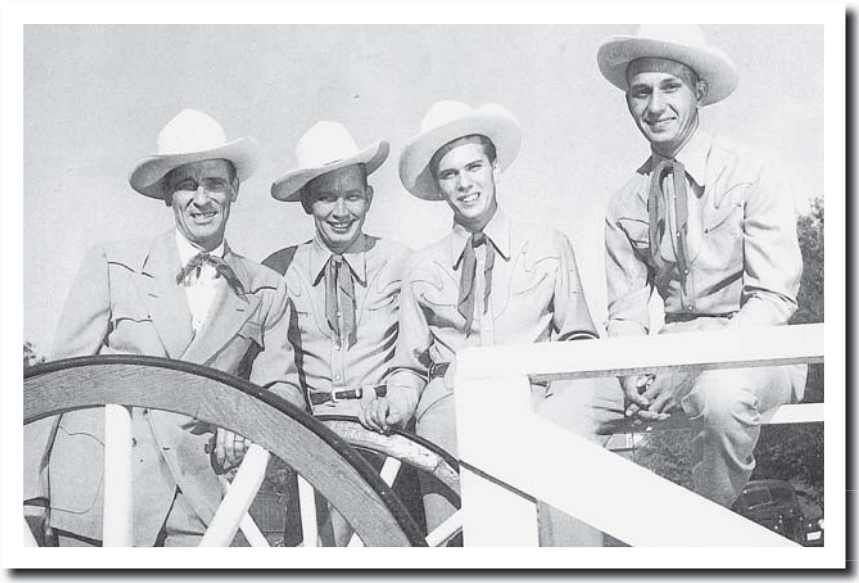
There's four big days in Bandera. Memorial Day weekend is when all the nearby dude ranches open up, a big blowout then. They used to call it the Stompede. The Fourth of July is a big day. Labor Day is a big deal because that's the day the dude ranches close. And when the weekend hunting season opens. It's traditional.

People from all over the state would come to Bandera for the Stompede. I saw empty beer cans knee-deep in front of the Silver Dollar Saloon. People laying on the sidewalks, in the parks. They elected a sheriff shortly after that, put a screeching halt to that bullshit. But even though they don't call it Stompede anymore and they cut the wild shit out, people still go there.

Janice and I spent the night up there that night before the Stompede. And I sat up all night talking to her. No hanky-panky. She was beautiful. She listened, and was interested in what I was saying, and I was young. And it sounds like I'm putting the blame on Jean. I'm really not; it would be unfair to do that. If you talked to her today, she might say she shouldn't have been treating me the way she was. But to be totally honest, I don't think that I would've changed even if things had been different. That type of behavior was not only accepted among musicians, it was the thing to do. Tracy Byrd brings his family with him on the road. He can afford it. I couldn't, but I probably wouldn't have anyway. They needed to be at home. I needed to be at the motel.

I think my upbringing had a great deal to do with it. I've had psychologists, several of them, tell me that behavior becomes a pattern instilled in you at a very early age. Even though I hated the situation between my dad and mom, I followed that same pattern. And even though I didn't want to be like that and felt guilty while I was doing it, it was like I was addicted to it. I can't explain why I couldn't stop. I blame no one but myself for all my mistakes.

A couple of weeks later, Billy Western called and said he had a show in Bryan, Texas, with Ernest Tubb. Somehow or another Willie wound up on the show, playing guitar. At that time, ET wasn't carrying a drummer, and they were playing a dance, so Billy Western called me. ET had the Texas Troubadours, one of the swingingest bands on the road:



Ernest Tubb and the Texas Troubadours: left to right, *Ernest Tubb, Jack Drake, Dicky Harris, and Billy Byrd. Photo courtesy of A. J. Lockett, Ernest Tubb Record Shop, Forth Worth.*

Leon Rhodes on guitar, Buddy Emmons on steel, Jack Drake on bass, some guy playing rhythm guitar, and ET. That was it. No drummer.

After the gig, I remember asking ET for a job. He said, "Well, son, I'm not using drums right now, but if I ever do, I'll sure give you a call." (Years later I had an opportunity to sing with ET on the *Midnight Jamboree* out of Nashville. The show was broadcast from the Ernest Tubb Record Shop, owned by ET, across from the Opry on Broadway. I tripped on some wooden cases coming off the stage and landed on my butt with a thud that reverberated all over the Western Hemisphere on live radio. Grant Turner was reading a commercial, and looked up in astonishment. ET came running over and put his arms around me and asked, "Son, are you hurt?" I said, "No, sir, I'm fine." He said, "It's a damn good thing, because we'd sue this son of a bitch for everything he's got.")

ON THAT TRIP TO BRYAN, I caught up with Willie. I said, "What have you been doing, man."

He told me he'd been up to Oregon and had a big radio show up there. Cut a record and sold a bunch of them. I told him I'd heard

"Night Life" on the radio. He said he'd been living in Houston, teaching beginner guitar, just like I was doing in San Antonio. He had sold his song "Family Bible" to Paul Buskirk, Walt Breeland, and Claude Gray for fifty dollars, and he was going to Nashville. His theory was: "If I can write a song good enough that somebody'd pay money for it, then I can write other songs that are just as good."

I said, "Well, let me hear from you from time to time."

Janice went with me to Bryan. We went on back to San Antonio, and one thing led to another. Next thing you know I was in love with her.

Janice had a little boy. That bothered me, you know. The whole scene bothered me, but I couldn't stop. There comes a point in a relationship, at least it did with me, that you start seeing 'em on a slipping-around basis. It starts with a cup of coffee somewhere, then she comes out to a show where you're working and you go out and park somewhere. Driving home, you're thinking, "How am I gonna explain being two hours late?"

So you begin to lie, and one lie leads to another lie, and then you've got to remember all these lies. You know, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave . . ."

So you go back home and tell yourself, "I'm gonna quit this. I'm gonna stay at home and be a good father and a good husband." And after about three days you've gotta go see her again. That's the way it was for me.

I thought, "I'm gonna have to move out because I can no longer look in the mirror and shave every morning. I just cannot keep this charade up any longer." I finally told Jean to her face. I said, "I'm runnin' around. I'm having an affair and you're too good a person, too good a mother, to be treated this way."

She thought it was because we lived with her mom and we didn't have enough privacy, so she and the baby moved out from her mom and got their own place. I got an efficiency apartment with the steel player, Denny Mathis, a friend of mine, so I could see Janice without having to lie.

Gaye was two or two and a half when Jean and I separated, though it was a long time before we were divorced. As I left the house that night with the last of my stuff, I had to walk through the kitchen to get to the back door, and she had Gaye sitting in a high chair, and she was crying. That nearly killed me.

Jean has always been one of the best friends I've got and still is to this day. She's the mother of my only daughter, and we have three

grandkids. Even though we were divorced, when I wasn't on the road, we remained two parents to our daughter—PTA meetings, school functions. My daughter always knew she had a daddy. You don't divorce your kids.

Jean never remarried. I guess when I leave them, they've had enough.

JANICE AND HER SON and I were living in this little duplex on Lewis Street. I felt kind of like an outlaw on the lam. I didn't want Jean to know where I was.

By this time, I'd left the Western Downbeats and joined the Texas Top Hands. They were sponsored by Lone Star Beer, and they had a little bus that looked like a Lone Star beer can. San Antonio had two breweries, Pearl and Lone Star, and these breweries sponsored bands, with radio programs and uniforms and a custom-painted bus. Adolph Hoffner was sponsored by Pearl. The Texas Top Hands were with Lone Star.

Instrumentally, the Top Hands weren't near the band that the Downbeats were, but we played the Bob Wills stuff, things like "Rosetta," "Dinah," some of the old Polish polka tunes. We mixed it up like Adolph Hoffner, who led one of the most popular bands in San Antonio going back to the 1930s. The Top Hands' leader, Easy Adams, had enough foresight to have us younger guys learn some of the new hit songs. One of the songs we learned was "Hello Walls," the Faron Young hit. It was almost six or seven months before a friend of mine told me Willie had written the damned thing!

I remember being in the shower, and I'm looking out at the treetops, and that inner voice said to me, "If Willie Nelson can write a hit song, you can, too. Open up your mind. If he can do it, so can you."

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DEVIL'S DISCIPLE

I am the misery in your tangled mind
I am the teardrops falling from your eyes
I'll walk the floor with you while you wear out your shoes
I'm the devil's disciple
Shake hands with Mr. Blues

—"DEVIL'S DISCIPLE," WRITTEN BY JOHNNY BUSH,
RECORDED BY SONNY BURNS

NOBODY IN HOUSTON was ever worth a shit. To my way of thinking, with my young skull full of mush, Hank Williams was great because he was from Montgomery, Alabama. That's why he made it. Webb Pierce was from Monroe, Louisiana, that's why he made it. Houston, Texas, was square. I don't know why I felt that way. To my way of thinking, Floyd Tillman wasn't from Houston; he was born in Oklahoma. Houston was full of rejects or wannabes. George Jones recorded in Houston, but he was from back in the sticks, near Silsbee. Nobody'd ever come out of Houston that I'd ever heard of.

My uncle Jerry Jericho was a prime example. He was a local

star, but never hit it big. He had several chances. He had a chance for national exposure on the *Louisiana Hayride*, which was a springboard to the Opry, but he didn't go. And the reason he didn't go? The *Hayride* paid $18 on Saturday night; he could make $125 in Houston. If you're feeding two children and a wife and keeping up a home, it's kinda hard to turn down $125 to drive to Shreveport and back for $18. Hell, it'd cost you $30 to do it. But in the big picture, he'd have been better off to do it for the exposure. He could've sold more records, he could've got more dates. He was good enough, too, no question about it. But he didn't have the foresight. He regretted it years later, he really did.

Hank Locklin eventually did what Uncle Jerry should've done. He and my uncle both had fifteen-minute radio shows every day on KLEE in the Milby Hotel. But Hank held out; he wouldn't work unless his price was met. Hank was from Florida originally, and he wouldn't work in the two-bit dives in Houston. He had hit records—"Let Me Be the One," "Send Me the Pillow That You Dream On"—the latter of which was a giant RCA hit. He was living in Houston but would not compromise. Finally, he signed with the Grand Ole Opry. He did what my uncle could've done.

I was in a negative mode without realizing it. So I started writing negative songs like "The Living Dead," about a man who'd been rejected by a woman. I think most country songs are about rejection. And every one I wrote, I took to Charlie Walker, the top deejay in San Antonio and a recording artist who later became a member of the Opry. And I'd have to say Charlie Walker was always very kind, very nice, and he'd listen. He would say, "John, you're writing good." I'd make a little demo on reel-to-reel tape, and I'd take him a reel, and he'd play it at the station. He'd say, "You're on the right track. That's not the type of song I'm recording right now, but don't stop writing."

One night in the summer of 1962, I was playing with the Texas Top Hands in Junction, Texas, and the phone rang. Janice said, "Willie Nelson's trying to get in touch with you."

I knew Willie had gone to work playing bass for Ray Price. Willie is known as a great guitar player, not as a bass player. But any good guitar player can play bass guitar with a little practice because it's the same four strings: E, A, D, G. They played at one of the military bases, and I went out to see them. Willie said, "I got a royalty check for $25,000 the other day." $25,000! It's like winning the lottery, you know? He bought Ray's '59 Cadillac. He's flying to the jobs, the rest of the boys are on the bus. Ray was renting rooms at the Douche-Bag Motel for the band, and

Willie'd be at the penthouse downtown. He was just spending every dime he made just as fast as he made it. And I thought, "This is where it's at. I got to keep on writing!"

So I called the number that Janice had left, and Willie said, "Steve Bess is leaving the band. You want a gig playing with Ray Price?" I said, "Are you kiddin'?" He said, "Meet us in Chickasha, Oklahoma."

I got Denny Mathis, the steel player with the Top Hands, and Janice to drive me to Oklahoma. I was so confident. I didn't have any money. I sold my golf clubs to get some money, I sold my tape recorder, anything I could turn into cash. Got to Chickasha, met the band, said goodbye to Janice and Denny. We were going from there to Oklahoma City to play an Opry show at Tinker Air Force Base with Hawkshaw Hawkins, Jeannie Shepherd, Roger Miller, and Charlie Walker. Pretty big package.

That was the first time I met Roger Miller. Everybody liked Roger, and he seemed to like everybody else. But to me he had an attitude. I'll give him this, he was a genius songwriter, and he wrote a lot of great ballads. He also wrote a lot of novelty songs: "You can't roller-skate in a buffalo herd." He'd have made a mint today writing children's books.

That first night when they let me sit in, I knew something was wrong: I didn't know how to play the shuffle beat. I could swing my ass off on the instrumentals, but I wasn't hip to the shuffle beat, which is the stick playing on the 2 and 4 beats and the brushes playing eighth notes. It's 2/4 on the kick drum, 4/4 on the bass fiddle, the left hand on the piano doubling the bass. Jazz musicians like Louis Prima were playing the shuffle beat long before Ray was. But Ray's shuffle beat became the essence of Texas honky-tonk dance music.

I could play brushes and I could play sticks, but I wasn't hip to the stick-and-brush beat. We played from Oklahoma City to Midland, Texas. Ray wouldn't even look at me. After Midland, the band was going back to Nashville. I was planning on going back to San Antone to load up and move to Nashville myself. Willie was flying to California to do his first Liberty album, *. . . And Then I Wrote*.

I asked Willie, "Do I have the job or not?" He said, "I don't know. Let me go talk to Ray and I'll call you."

Janice and I were staying at another motel. Price called me: "Hi, Sweets, this is Price." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Son, Steve Bess has decided not to quit. He's been with me a long time. I've got a lot of jobs, and I need him. I appreciate you coming out. I'll keep you in mind."

It broke my heart. I thought, "Now what?"

The Johnnie Lee Wills Band, Cain's Academy, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

There I was in Midland, knowing the Top Hands had probably already hired someone else to take my place. The night before I left San Antone to go to Oklahoma, the Johnnie Lee Wills band come through and the drummer had turned his notice in. So I thought I'd call Johnnie Lee real quick. He said, "Yeah, job's open. Come on up and let's give it a try."

We were fixin' to go out on a thirty-day one-nighter tour, and Johnny Lee's bus was a school bus. It wasn't a road bus: it was a school bus with seats in it, no bunks. The Wills brothers didn't believe in bunks. You set in a damn seat! He paid a salary, $125 a week, playing seven nights a week. We went through Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, playing every night. I mean *every* night.

My first night, no rehearsal, nothing. Johnnie Lee said, "Son, you know I never hire anybody outright. I just tell them to come on and we'll try it for a while. Old Clarence Cagle's been with me about thirty years, and I ain't hired him yet."

He said, "Now, what's very important is our theme song. I haven't

heard a drummer yet that could play it right the first time." I asked Junior Pruneda, the bass player who later played with Ernest Tubb and the Texas Troubadours, "What the hell is the theme song, man, that it could be so rough?" He said, "It's a fast two-beat." I said, "Well, why is he telling me this?" He said, "He just wanted to spook you a little bit."

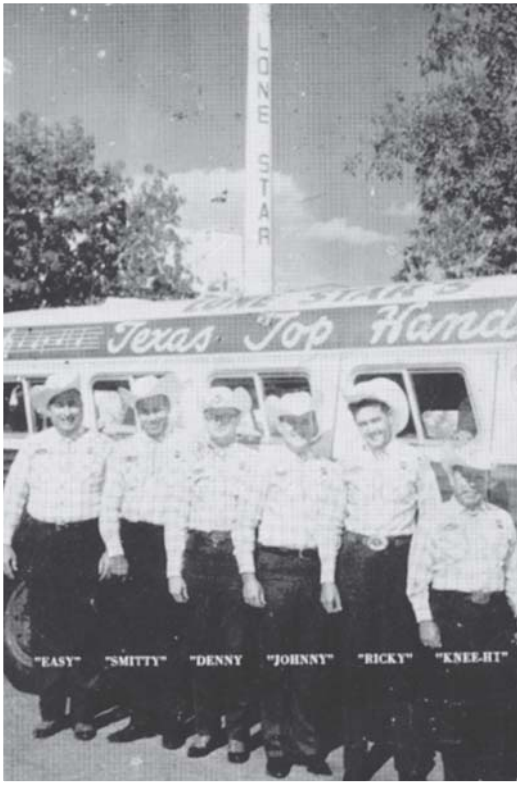
Just a fast two-beat. If you ever played "The Orange Blossom Special" or a hoedown, there was nothing to it. Hell, I fell right into it. What was so hard about that? Johnnie Lee looked back and smiled: "Good, son, that's good."

I thought, "That's good for you." I didn't like nothing about it. I didn't like the bus. I didn't like workin' one-nighters and no sleep. We were lucky to get into a motel. He put two guys in a bed. Didn't like that. After about two weeks I turned my notice in. I called Easy Adams. He said, "You wanna come back with me?" I said, "I'd give anything to come back." He said, "Come on."

So I came back to San Antone for Easy Adams and the Texas Top Hands. But I made up my mind to try to get out of that negative mode instead of being bitter at Ray Price for not hiring me. I knew it was my fault that I didn't cut the gig. I began to learn the shuffle beat. I'd watch Steve Bess, but it was all so foreign. It was like getting out of a glider into a fighter jet. You know: brush, stick, brush, stick. And the way he would change, play the stick across the snare. Plus trying to keep the tempo. It was just hard.

I started experimenting on the job with the Top Hands. Thank God for Easy. He wouldn't say anything, even though Easy liked a two-beat when he played the fiddle. He was one of the old-school Texas fiddle players. If you threw in a turnaround, it would throw him off. He wrote "The Bandera Waltz," a country classic recorded by Slim Whitman and others. He wanted us to learn some of the new songs to stay current with the crowd, but the band couldn't play them like the records. How do you think "Hello Walls" sounded played by an old-school swing band?

But I learned a lot from Easy as far as managing a band and working a show. He could read the mood of a crowd, like Bob Wills could. Along with Adolph Hoffner, he was one of the best front men I've ever seen. So congenial. He was a big guy, six foot four, 240 pounds. He drove the bus to the gig, but he'd want to party after the gig, so the piano player drove the bus home. That old broken-down bus now sits outside the Broken Spoke, a classic Texas honky-tonk in Austin.



*The Texas Top Hands, featuring Easy Adams (*left*) and Johnny Bush (*third from right*), Lone Star Brewery, San Antonio, circa 1962.*

Willie's budding career had awakened something in me: "If he can do it, so can I!"

I kept writing 'em and taking 'em to Charlie Walker. In my little Lewis Street apartment I wrote "An Eye for an Eye." I wrote "Devil's Disciple" on Easy Adams's bus, coming back from a gig. The devil's disciple: boy, I thought that was so original! I wrote that song in twenty minutes. (From what I've heard, all hits are written in about twenty minutes.) When I went to get it copyrighted, come to find out there's a movie, *The Devil's Disciple*. It must've made it into my subconscious. But I felt like I had finally written a real song.

Every time Ray Price came through town, if I could I'd go see him. On one visit I told him I had some songs and played him "The Living Dead" and "Devil's Disciple." I saw him perk up a little bit, and he said, "What are you doing tonight, hoss?" He told me to come over

to the motel. When I got there, Roger Miller was there. Ray's laying on the bed, and Linda Price, Ray's wife, came into the room. And she was a knockout. Boy, she looked good.

They were having a spat. She wanted to go swimming. She'd been drinking.

Ray said, "I'll be out there in a minute, baby, I wanna hear Johnny's Bush's song." She said, "Fuck you." First time I'd ever heard a woman say that. My modesty was shocked. It never fazed him. The guys in the room seemed used to it.

When I met her again in Oklahoma, I lit her cigarettes for her. We became friends. She could be a very sweet lady. She would take up for the boys in the band. But to hear her talk like that then, I couldn't believe it.

So Roger Miller's sitting there, and my mouth got dry. I began to shake. I'm gonna sing in front of one of the greatest songwriters of the time? I sang "The Living Dead" and "Devil's Disciple."

After I finished, Ray looked over at Roger and said, "What'd you think, hoss?" Roger said, "Well written." That was his only comment. Not "Good," not "Bad," not "You should record it quick!" but "Well written."

Price owned Pamper Music Publishing. Roger wrote for Tree Publishing. These were two of the biggest song publishing companies in Nashville. After hearing my song, Ray told Roger, "There's another ax to chop down that 'Tree.'"

He said, "I'll tell you what, son. I'll have Randy Hughes call you. He's doing some work for Pamper. Are you tied up with a writer or a publisher?"

"No," I lied. I had signed a deal with Glad Music in Houston for "Devil's Disciple," and I couldn't remember if I'd signed a staff writer's contract or a contract just for that song.

The biggest star that I knew I could get in touch with at the time, besides Charlie Walker, was Sonny Burns. He'd just had a big hit on the United Artists label, "In My Blue House Painted White." United Artists was considered a major label. Pappy Daily was running it. He put George Jones on there for a while too. So I went to Houston with my little reel-to-reel tape to Club 66, where Sonny Burns was playing. Introduced myself to him and played the song. He listened, but he wasn't turned on by it. His attitude seemed to be, "Why do you think your song is a hit?"

That same night I went to see Link Davis, who'd had a hit with the Cajun tune "Big Mamou," playing out on Humble Road in some old

dive. I sang "Devil's Disciple" for Link Davis. And he said, "By God, that's a hit! I'll cut that tune."

The next night I played it for my uncle Jerry Jericho, and he flipped out. He called Ted Daffan, who wanted to hear it, so I played for him and he flipped out too. Now suddenly there's three guys that want to record one of my songs, "Devil's Disciple." The lyrics go:

When love goes out the window
I come stealin' in
I make my home deep inside the hearts of broken men
When I cast my spell on you
There's nothing you can do
I'm the devil's disciple
Shake hands with Mr. Blues

When she walked out and left you
I brought misery to your mind
The pain you feel inside you now will just increase with time
You'll wish you never met me
Many times before I'm through
I'm the devil's disciple
Shake hands with Mr. Blues

I am the misery in your tangled mind
I am the teardrops fallin' from your eyes
I'll walk the floor with you while you wear out your shoes
I'm the devil's disciple
Shake hands with Mr. Blues

So, take my hand, my foolish friend,
And listen to me well
I'll make your life a livin' hell
So if you're wondering who I am that's come to call on you
I'm the devil's disciple
Shake hands with Mr. Blues

Link Davis had heard it, Jerry Jericho had heard it, and Ted Daffan had heard it, and they all wanted to cut it. Plus, Ray liked it. I knew it was a good song. But Sonny Burns, the guy who I wanted to cut it, hadn't really heard it yet.

So I went out to where Sonny worked on his day job. Pappy Daily had called him in to cut a hit record to piss George Jones off. Jones was getting obstinate, and Sonny was the one that brought Jones to Pappy Daily. So Pappy thought he'd use Burns to get Jones back in the fold. But during the day, Sonny's still driving a damned dump truck, haulin' dirt! Had his cigarettes rolled up in the sleeve of his T-shirt.

I played my song for him again, and this time, sure enough, he flipped. He learned the damned thing and recorded it for United Artists. After he cut it, I waited months for it to come out. The minute "Devil's Disciple" came out, every disc jockey in town played it 'cause I'd written it. It got a five-star rating in *Billboard*.

It was a big thing, it really was. And I knew I could write then.

IT WAS ABOUT THIS TIME that Willie left Price in Nashville and moved back to Fort Worth. He and Martha had finally separated, and he and Shirley Collie were together.

Shirley was a singer who had been married to Biff Collie, a top deejay at KFOX in LA. Willie, who was still playing bass with Ray at the time, rode into town on Ray's bus. Biff invited Willie over to his house for lunch or something. Willie met Shirley there, and they got to singing and playing. Willie was really impressed with her singing and playing and, apparently, other things. When the bus left town, she was on it.

Willie's band had Jimmy Day on steel. I was playing drums. When Shirley came up to sing, she would play the bass. Willie got Paul Buskirk, a hell of a guitar player, to come up from Houston to play guitar and mandolin. He could play light and jazzy, and he had a double-neck guitar, mandolin on top, guitar on the bottom. Ray Odom played fiddle. Willie was just playing a prop, an unamplified Martin. Can you believe that?

We rehearsed in Roswell, New Mexico, then played Albuquerque, where we picked up Dave Kirby on guitar. People were comin' out. Part of the show—and it's still part of his show—was to sing all the songs Willie had written that were hits for other artists—"Night Life," "Hello Walls," "Crazy," "Funny How Time Slips Away." But he also had a pretty good radio hit of his own at the time, "The Part Where I Cry." It was so different, the deejays just got all over it. Most songs at that time had no eloquence. You know, "She broke my heart, I broke her jaw . . ." They were aimed at a ten-year-old mentality.

Willie put an end to the three-chord song. As he explained it,

"Crazy Arms" has three chords, "Stardust" has a lot of chords. His songs were somewhere in between. Plus, the lyrics were just more intelligent. "Life is a picture, and I play the lead / And my greatest line was goodbye / My leading lady just walked out on me / And this is the part where I cry."

We got to Vegas to play the headliner spot at the Golden Nugget. Up until that time, not too many hillbillies had played the Nugget besides Bob Wills. Across the street at the Mint, Kitty Wells and Johnny Wright were playing.

Can you imagine Kitty Wells at the Mint? They had a strip show there. This vaudeville comedienne, Billie Bird, would come up after those beautiful showgirls with her big ol' floppy tits hangin' down. She had tassels on. You know they'd hang down to her knees. One of those strippers would be doing her dance, and she'd get her tassel on her left breast goin' this way and the other one goin' that way. Billie Bird would try to imitate her, and it was funny as hell. It was a showstopper.

She'd go off, and here come the Kitty Wells show. Grand Ole Opry what? You couldn't even sing a drinkin' song at the Opry, and here's one of the stars singing in a strip joint!

Of course, the Opry didn't mind if you sang about murder, rape, runnin' around and cheatin', and even incest. "Knoxville Girl" is about a murder. The guy hits her on the head, throws her in the river. "Tragic Romance" was about incest. Songs about cheatin' were prevalent. But you couldn't sing a drinkin' song. Sorry, it's a family show. You can kill that gal and throw her in the river, but you can't say "beer"! It was insane.

Anyway, here we are at the Nugget. Scared to death. Headline spot, 8 p.m. to 2 a.m., six forty-minute shows. Between shows we'd do a costume change, have a drink, smoke a cigarette. The kid from Kashmere Gardens, playing the Golden Nugget! Playing Vegas, period. I had never seen anything like it. It never got dark because of all the lights.

The manager of the Nugget was Bill Green, and he was a country music fan. Bill Green sent his flunky over to talk to Willie, and I'm in the room when this flunky says, "Willie, Mr. Green wants the big guitar player to stand on the right of the stage instead of the left. He wants Shirley to be up on the stage the whole time, instead of you callin' her out." He wanted several changes.

Willie listened very intently, and when the man was through, he said, "Is that all?" The guy said, "Yes sir, that just about does it." Willie

said, "Well then, you go back and tell Bill Green that my show is not gonna change from the way it is."

While he's making this little speech, I'm seeing dollar bills, this money I'm expecting to make, just flying away. He said, "You tell Mr. Green I'm not changing my show from the way it is and that I'm sorry that he don't like it. You can also tell him this. My career will survive with or without the Golden Nugget." The flunky said, "Yes sir, I'll tell him," and walked out.

Willie went back to talking to Shirley—they're planning on getting married while they're there. I'm in a state of shock. We hadn't gotten paid yet, we're not gonna get paid . . . we're done. In my opinion, we can start packin'. Nothing ever happened! Nothing was ever said. We went on that night like we always did. Green never said a word. Can you imagine? Willie needed that gig. God knows I needed that gig. But he held his ground and nothing was said. He played the Nugget three or four more times after that.

Willie announced, "Shirley and I are gonna get married. We want you guys to go with us." So Paul Buskirk, Jimmy Day, and I went to the little wedding chapel. We signed the book: Willie Nelson and Shirley Collie Nelson; best man, Jimmy Day; matron of honor, Paul Buskirk; flower girl, Johnny Bush. The whole thing was a joke anyway. I'm not even sure he was divorced from Martha at the time. He had a way of sliding in and out of marriages. He admitted in his book he wasn't divorced from Shirley when he married Connie, his third wife. He called it a minor detail that he had overlooked.

Paul Buskirk was only hired to do that one trip, so he went back to his music store in Houston, and Ray Odom went back to Fort Worth. Willie needed someone to front the band and warm up the crowd before he came out. He wanted me to start fronting and hire a drummer.

I gave it a lot of thought, but I didn't feel like I was ready yet. So I went to Corpus and talked to Charlie Harris, a guitar player who sang like Andy Williams. I was thinking more about Willie's career than mine. So we had Charlie Harris and Jimmy Day, but we still needed a bass man. Eddie Sweat didn't last, so we hired Pete Burke Jr., my old friend from Houston who'd worked with Hank Thompson and was on some of my record sessions. The best stand-up bass man I've ever heard.

That was a swinging band. We toured on a package show with Slim Whitman, Little Jimmy Dickens, the Wilburn Brothers, Orville

Couch, and Frankie Miller. By the time we got to Albuquerque, there was at least forty people in the show. Our band had to back the whole group except for Ray Price, who had his own band. Ray told Willie our band was the worst band he had ever heard. A year later every single one of us was working for Price except for Willie. Our band became Ray's band, the Cherokee Cowboys: Charlie Harris, myself, and Pete Burke Jr. Jimmy Day and Buddy Emmons kept alternating on steel. One would quit and the other would come on.

THE FIRST AND ONLY TIME I met Patsy Cline, I was playing with Willie in Tulsa at Cain's Ballroom, Bob Wills's old headquarters in the late 1930s. Patsy had done a show in town. She'd just recorded Willie's tune "Crazy." It was an extremely big hit, and of course Willie wanted to see her. So we went up to the hotel room—me and Willie and Shirley and Jimmy Day.

I'd heard stories about Patsy Cline. That she was beautiful. That she was a heavy drinker. That she could swear like a sailor. In other words, she was like a man, just like a typical musician, except beautiful.

Everything I'd heard proved to be true. She was laying in bed, fully clothed. Party goin' on in her hotel room. She's drinking straight whiskey. Her husband, Charlie Dick, kept butting in while Patsy and Willie were trying to talk. He kept running between 'em and interrupting the conversation. She's telling Willie, "You keep writing 'em and I'll keep singing 'em." Finally, after Charlie Dick had interrupted about four or five times with some off-the-wall bullshit, Willie looked him right square in the eye and said, "I'm a son of a bitch, ain't you?" And the guy shut up, didn't say another word.

Not too long after that, in March of 1963, I was back in San Antonio playing NCO clubs with a pop group while Willie's band was off the road. I went by the bandleader's house, and he said, "Did you hear the news? There's been a plane crash." Patsy Cline, Randy Hughes, Cowboy Copas, and Hawkshaw Hawkins were killed.

Only then did I find the letter from Randy Hughes that I mentioned earlier after I had played "Devil's Disciple" for Ray Price. Ray was going to get Hughes, who worked for Pamper Music as well as Patsy Cline, to get in touch with me about becoming a staff writer for Pamper. I had that letter for two months, and because it didn't have Pamper Music or Ray Price on it, I overlooked it, thought it was a bill.

When I opened it, all it said was, "Interested in you as a writer, and some of your songs, and we'll try to get together." It was no big deal. Kind of a disappointment in one way, but then the guy got killed before I even got to know him.

IT WAS ABOUT THIS TIME that I got high, really high, for the first time. Back in the early '60s, if you were caught in possession of just a seed of marijuana, it would get you twenty years in Texas. It was ridiculous, but people that liked pot had to be really careful.

We'd come into Fort Worth on our way to a big package show in Weatherford, about a half hour from Willie's house. We'd been drinking whiskey all day long as fast as we could swallow it. I knew all I had to do was take a couple of white crosses and it would sober me up. Speed will do that. Come time to get ready to go play, Eddie Sweat took a paper sack, a brown paper sack, and he rolled what looked to me like a White Owl cigar. It was big as your thumb, you know.

He said, "John, you told me you couldn't get high?" I said, "That shit don't faze me in the least." I'd smoked pot lots of times before and hadn't been that impressed. I was looking for that euphoric pill high: the upper, euphoria. Weed has a different high altogether than what I was expecting. I was mellowing out, but I didn't know it. So I kept saying, "That shit don't faze me."

He hands me that cigar. I sucked it down to my toes, you know, and held my breath, everything they told me to do. I said, "Forget it." I got in my car to drive to Willie's. All of a sudden, I felt like I was flying down the road, and I never was a fast driver. I thought I was speeding, and I was doing about twenty miles per hour. Felt like I was on the racetrack. To get to Willie's house, you had to make two turns. Somehow or another, I lost my bearings. I'm in another neighborhood, completely lost. I begin to panic; weirdest feeling I ever had—alcohol, pills, weed, all at the same time.

I finally found Willie's street and turned in the driveway. It was August 1963. No air-conditioning, but I'm totally dry—armpits, face, totally dry, no perspiration, no sweat. I told Shirley, "I think I'm high." She said, "I think you are, too. Look at your eyes." My eyes looked like two ball bearings. She said, "Take this."

I don't know what the hell it was, a black-and-white something, but I took it. I thought, "I'm not getting any better." I was still so high, my mouth was dry. Everything was moving in slow motion.

I had to let somebody else drive. I felt like I had to throw up after she gave me that pill. We stopped at a service station. I went into the restroom. Before I could throw up, I felt this pain, like I had to relieve my bowels. So I sat on the commode with my pants at my ankles. Think about this predicament, wrassling with these two things goin' on at the same damn time, high on weed for the first time. I reached over and grabbed this little wastebasket that you put hand towels in, put it down between my legs, and you guessed it. Both happened at the same time, throwing up and evacuating my bowels. Never happened before or since.

I was almost ashamed to tell the guys what had happened. By this time they're all laughing at me: "Can't get high, huh, John?" We get to Weatherford, and the place is packed. No air-conditioning in this auditorium, no ventilation at all. Everybody sweating buckets, drops falling on the floor, except me. I'm high and dry. I guess that's where the term originated. It lasted for at least two hours until I felt a little drop of perspiration. I was coming out of it.

From that day on, all I had to do was pick up a joint and take one hit, and I was there. Never did mess with it very much. If it came by me, I'd hit it. I knew my limits. I never did use it all the time like some of the other guys did.

J. R. Chatwell, he turned everybody on. J.R. was a jazz fiddle player—Johnny Gimble's favorite fiddler. He worked most of his career with Adolph Hoffner and the Pearl Wranglers, and before that with Cliff Bruner out of Beaumont, another good jazz fiddle player. Cliff Bruner went to Stamford, Texas, to pull J.R. out of the cotton fields. Literally drug him out of the cotton fields and said, "You're gonna play." He stayed with Adolph twenty or thirty years. Only band I ever seen him with. I was around him a lot. He was really a funny guy, man. But like Jimmy Day, he stayed high all the time.

Strangely enough, there was only one guy in our band who didn't get high back then: Willie Nelson. One time Willie booked a gig at Schroeder Hall outside of Victoria. Me and Eddie Sweat and Jimmy Day are standing under a tree out there, passing the joint. Willie walks by. He's got on a suit and tie, Stacy Adams shoes, hair slicked back.

"Hey Willie, you want some of this?"

"No," he says. "That shit gives me a headache."

This is Willie Nelson we're talking about here.

I BELIEVED THAT ONE DAY Willie was gonna be as big as Sinatra and Dean Martin. I knew in my heart that Willie was gonna break all the political barriers separating jazz, pop, country, and swing, that he was gonna tear that wall down. I mentioned that to a lot of people all the time. They'd say, "Hell, he don't sing, he talks." I said, "Listen to what he's sayin'? Just listen to him."

We had a swingin' band, man. We were playin' jazz, you know? But in 1963, Willie broke up the band to go back to Nashville to write songs and raise hogs. He said, "I hope y'all understand."

Yeah, I did, so I come back to San Antone, and I'm workin' the joints. I'm working six nights a week, singing from the drums with a bass player and a guitar player on Blanco Road at a place called the Coral Reef (which previously had been Music Land, the place where we jammed on Sunday afternoons with Gatemouth Brown). The outlook was bleak because I'd already left Easy Adams the second time to go with Willie. I kept writing songs, and I thought, "God, here I am."

At around this time, the Wilburn Brothers, a traditional country harmony duo, had started a publishing company called Surefire. Teddy and Doyle Wilburn fought constantly. Hank Williams's steel guitar great, Don Helms, was working with the Wilburn Brothers. Not only did he play steel guitar, he acted as referee.

Shortly before our band broke up, the brothers asked Willie if he knew any new writers that were looking for a publisher. He said, "Well, I got just your man. My drummer, Johnny Bush, is writing his ass off." He told 'em about Sonny Burns and "Devil's Disciple." I wasn't under contract to anyone, although the Ray Price–Randy Hughes offer was still hanging.

So the Wilburns come through San Antone, and Teddy said for me come over the motel room to talk. Doyle had already gone back to Nashville. Teddy said, "Here's our plan, John. We're interested in you not only as a writer but as a recording artist." Be still my restless heart, you know. He said, "We've asked Willie to cut a demo of you so we'll have something on file, and we'll get started. Get some of your tunes recorded, and then maybe record you for Decca Records."

Can you imagine telling that to somebody that wants it so bad they can taste it? To have somebody of that caliber tell you that it's possible? Even if it didn't happen, you know you're getting close.

Willie set up the demo session in Fort Worth. I was so anxious to get there, I got there a day early. I don't know where my mind was. Went to the Texas Hotel, downtown. We didn't have any money. I said,

"Not to worry, we'll call Willie. Willie will help us out." So Willie pulls up to the front door to pick us up. I told Shirley, "We're broke." She said, "Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it." Willie played guitar on the session; the steel man was Tommy Morrell, who has since become one of the best western-swing steel players in Texas.

A couple of years ago I called Surefire to see if they were still in business. They were, so I said, "You wouldn't happen to have that old demo we cut?" They did. In 2002 we released it as a bonus disc with the album *Green Snakes*. The only song on the demo that was ever recorded was "An Eye for an Eye." Price recorded it on *The Other Woman*, and Don Walser covered it on one of his albums a few years ago.

After the session, I went back to San Antonio, working six nights a week at the Coral Reef, singing from the drums for ten bucks a night. It was a grind.

I thought I would promote shows on the side to make some money. That's how crazy I was. I had in the back of my mind booking Ray Price and the Cherokee Cowboys in an airplane hangar for $800. That was a lot of money back then. I booked Willie Nelson as a single for $150. Anything we made over that I was going to keep. The *Red Foley Show* was coming to town that same day. So I sold Willie for $75 to sing a couple of songs on the *Red Foley Show*. I'd already made half my money to pay Willie, so I figured I was home free. But I spent more on advertising than I made. I had to ask Willie if I could borrow $50. He wrote me a check that bounced. I still have it under the glass in my coffee table.

My personal life was just as crazy: I'm not legally divorced from Jean at this point; I'm living with Janice; and I'm bangin' every gal that come in the Coral Reef in the backseat of the car in the parking lot. All of a sudden I was having to explain to Janice why I couldn't come in before daylight, when it was a ten-minute drive from our place to the club. Every night I had to come up with a different excuse. It was like being married again. It's a vicious cycle. Once you start that kind of behavior, it's a pattern. I had no idea how it would end.

I was playing the horse races at Alamo Village on Labor Day 1963 when I got a call from Charlie Walker. I said, "What's up, Charlie?"

And he said, "Price just called me. He needs a drummer." I said, "Full time?"

He said, "All I know is he needs a drummer to finish his tour, so you can work that out with him. He's got Darryl McCall on bass. He brought Donny Lytle, a bass player out of Ohio, to play drums, and he's not making it."

THE OTHER WOMAN

The other woman isn't prettier than you
But the other woman soothes my wounded pride
And more important, I feel wanted again
I can't give up the other woman in my life

—"THE OTHER WOMAN," WRITTEN BY DON ROLLINS,
RECORDED BY RAY PRICE

I MET RAY ON THE GOLF COURSE in San Antonio in the fall of '63. He was doing a Southwest tour from San Antone to Albuquerque and back to Fort Sam in San Antone.

This time I was ready. I understood the shuffle rhythm, and I was determined to knock Ray out. Between Steve Bess and myself, Ray had had two other drummers, Jan Curtis and Bob Preston. Both were tremendous show drummers, like Louie Bellson and Gene Krupa. But they didn't really gel with the country-swing beat. They were strictly jazz drummers. I played some solos, but basically I was a rock-solid tempo-type drummer. Price liked a good show drummer. He really did. But Buddy

and Darrell had had enough of showboats. They said, "We need someone to cut the shit and play what we're playing. We only do one show tune a night. We play fifty other songs."

Darryl McCall was playing bass, Buddy Emmons playing steel. Little Red Hayes was playing fiddle. We picked up Charlie Harris on guitar in Dallas. Donny Lytle stayed with us on the bus until we got to Nashville, then they let him go. He played bass instead of Darrell so Darrell could sing harmony with Ray until Charlie Harris could learn the songs and the harmony parts. Donny Lytle later became known as Johnny Paycheck. He was a hell of a bass player too.

So we went west. I asked Ray about a regular gig. He said, "Well, I don't know, son. I'll think about it." I wondered what was wrong, because the band was really cooking. At Fort Sam, Price finally said, "Son, you want the job?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "When can you leave?"

I asked Janice, "How quick can we leave?" She said, "Well, you go on ahead with the band, and when you get back to Dallas, we'll meet you." Janice sold what furniture she had and rented a U-Haul. She and her boy and the kitty cat met me in Dallas, and we took them to Nashville in the fall of 1963.

When I got there, I was never so disappointed in my entire life. There were no freeways, no expressways. It was crowded. It was hot. It was humid. The whole place looked like a giant Kashmere Gardens to me. I thought, "Oh God, here we go again."

We went to a motel on Dickerson Road and checked in. We didn't have a lot of money. I didn't know when Ray was going to work again. I called his house. The maid wouldn't call him to the phone. I said, "I'm the new drummer from Texas here in a motel. Please have him call. There's no phone in the room. He'll have to call the office." She and I and the kid hung around the motel for two or three days, eating hamburgers and waiting for a call from Price that never came. Finally, I began to panic: Maybe he forgot he hired me! Here I am. Can't leave. Little did I know, I'd be in that position for the next three years of my life. Couldn't leave Nashville.

Finally, Linda Price called. She said, "You all have a place to live?" I said, "No, we don't. And the money's running out." She said, "Well, as soon as Ray comes back from his hunting trip, we'll get back with you." Click.

When the band went back out with Ray, Linda Price helped Janice find an apartment. It was the old Marlboro Apartments, right down-

town where the Greyhound bus station is now, a few blocks from Ryman Auditorium. It was on the third floor on the southeast corner of the building. Old, red-brick, drab apartment house. We were just a few blocks from the old Union Station, a great big train yard. In Nashville, they burned coal instead of natural gas for heat, and the coal dust was in the air. It would get on your car, and that old brick building was sooty-looking.

But our apartment was on the third floor. It had this balcony. I remember after we got settled in, I went out on the balcony. Looking to the northeast, I could see the corner of the Ryman, the home of the Grand Ole Opry. That was only ten years after Hank Williams's death. At that point, ten years seemed like an eternity. Now, ten years seems like two weeks ago. As you get older, time flies that fast. And this inner voice said, "Well, here you are: pretty nice apartment, playing with the best band in town. Now what?"

I was in Nashville, where a songwriter should have been at that time. But I was also stuck. I couldn't have afforded to leave if I'd wanted to.

One thing about Nashville back in those days: there was no dance clubs like in Texas. Printer's Alley had some clubs, but they were bars with bandstands, not dance halls, you know. It wasn't the same. In Texas, if I was off, I could go to Melody Ranch, Cloverleaf, or some other joint and pick up ten or eleven bucks playing as a drummer. Get on the phone and call somebody: "Hey, get your ass out to Melody Ranch. Yeah, I can use you tonight." Not in Nashville. When you were off, buddy, you were off.

Tommy Hill—the front man for Price's original Cherokee Cowboys back in the fifties—helped by getting me some demo recording gigs. That paid ten bucks a side, though sometimes it would take thirty days for you to get your money. Later on, when I worked a couple of Price's sessions, it took two months for Columbia to pay. The check came through the union. You had to go out to the union to get your money. I thought that really sucked.

Come to find out, Ray took off every December to hunt, and we weren't on salary. Our first gig in December was New Year's Eve in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Just one night, and he only paid twenty-five dollars a gig, which was two or three times what I could have made in Texas per night. But if you're on the road, twenty-five dollars isn't a lot of money, plus I'm sending money to Jean for child support, and I was supporting

Janice and her son. So we had to make do, learn how to stretch a dollar. We'd buy potatoes in bulk at these little stores, and we'd buy a pound of hamburger and take Campbell's vegetable soup and make a goulash. It's not too bad.

My panic attacks continued after we moved to Nashville. For no apparent reason, all of a sudden I would become petrified with fear. And when the fear becomes intense, the adrenaline starts pumping, which causes your heart rate to rise, and you breathe too fast.

Sometimes I would get these attacks after drinking too much. Here's the thing about drinking, and I have to agree with George Jones on this: you drink sometimes when you really don't want to. You drink sometimes to make other people seem more interesting and to escape boredom. Then you get to the point where you're intoxicated and you can't play.

That's when you take the Dexedrine, the uppers. For some reason, this chemical that you would swallow would counteract the alcohol. I could be so drunk that I didn't know whether I'd be able to sit on my drum throne, then take a couple of uppers and in twenty minutes I'd be sailing, sober again. What happens, you start drinking on top of the pills, and you take pills on top of the alcohol.

I was never to the point to where I was addicted to either. But the comedowns were fierce, especially if you started trying to kick it with caffeine to make the pill last longer. It was at this time that these panic attacks seemed to become more frequent, and it was in the comedown stage that I would experience not only panic, but extreme depression.

And then I found a way to get around that by taking a couple of hits of pot. If you've got the comedowns on pills, the last thing you want to do is eat. I think this is what causes liver damage later on in life because all you're giving your body to ingest is alcohol and pills, which would destroy the appetite. A couple hits of marijuana would restore the appetite. You'd eat, and it would chase away the fear, and you'd get sleepy, and you'd sleep for a while.

But then the cycle would start again. I really thank God that He must have had His hand on my shoulder because I never really became addicted to any of that. It was when I finally I began to see myself like a monkey chasing his own tail that I began to pull up.

Ray Price and the Cherokee Cowboys: left to right, *Price, Little Red Hayes, Pete Burke, Johnny Bush, Charlie Harris, and Buddy Emmons. Moulton, Alabama, 1964.*

ALL MY LIFE I HAD PICTURED NASHVILLE a lot different than what it was. Coming from one of the most beautiful places in the world, San Antonio, Nashville is a shock. Especially when you know you can't leave. The old dirty red brick. The coal dust on the sides of the building. If you wore a white shirt outside in the fall or wintertime, when you got back it had black soot all over it. It reminded me of the dust on the clothes back in Kashmere Gardens.

Plus, there was nothing to do. Waylon Jennings got to Nashville about the same time I did. In his book, he talked about how there was something constantly going on. He stayed up constantly because if he went to sleep, he'd miss something. I don't know what part of Nashville he was talking about, 'cause I was a Cherokee Cowboy, the swingingest band in town, and I couldn't find it. Nothing was happening. No clubs. Nothing. Boots Randolph had a place in Printer's Alley, and sometimes Chet Atkins and Floyd Cramer would drive over and sit in. That might have been pretty good, but I was never down there the nights that this was going on. To me, Nashville was a boring town.

The first time I went into Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, across the al-

ley from the Opry, I couldn't believe it. I was used to Texas, where there were clubs and dance halls where you could hear a live band. You couldn't hear anything in Nashville unless you went to Buddy Emmons's house. He'd call a bunch of guys over, and you'd have a jam session.

The best time was when we were on the road because then we could play even while we were rolling down the highway. Price had a little Flex bus that had a power generator. Crank it up, and it'd produce 110 electrical current. It also powered the air conditioner. The bus had four bunks, which makes all the difference in the world. One guy drives, while the other four can sleep. Usually, somebody's riding shotgun.

Unlike a school bus, these were real nice, comfortable bus seats that would recline somewhat. The bunks could be made out into two couches. Buddy had a piece of plywood to stretch across the step down from the bunks. He'd set up his steel and amplifier, and the bass man would play upright so he didn't need an amplifier. I would set up a Junior Brown kit—you know, just snare drum, sock cymbal on my left foot, and a ride cymbal on my right hand. Fiddle player didn't need an amp. The guitar player would plug in with Buddy Emmons's amp, and we would play from Nashville to wherever we were going to go.

There was very little singing, just jamming. And if we'd get to the show early enough, we kept playing until it was time to get ready to do the show. After the show, at the motel we'd sit up and play. We played all the time. Musicians today, when they take that instrument out of the case with one hand, the other hand is palm up. Where's the money? Guys today don't play for fun. See, that's what we done. We played. And every now and then we'd get paid. And that was great. We had to live. But we played because that's what we done. We played.

On Ray's early records he tried to sing just like Hank Williams. When Hank died, Ray took over Hank's band, the Drifting Cowboys. Then Ray wanted to break out of that mold, so he let the Drifting Cowboys go because he didn't want to live in the shadow of Hank. He hired Blackie Crawford and the Western Cherokees, which had been Lefty Frizzell's band, to go on the road with him. Drifting Cowboys, Western Cherokees: Cherokee Cowboys, a combination of the two bands.

Then Ray had Indian warbonnets made for everybody; his went plumb down to the floor. It was really a sight to behold. When the curtains opened up, there'd be an eight-piece western-swing band in full

headdress. But they were heavy and hot, so everybody but Ray quit wearing the headdresses. Then finally he dropped it and just started wearing the beaded Nudie suits, and the guys had the Indian head with the feathers embroidered on the bib of the shirts. That was a badge of honor. The Cherokee Cowboys! I was proud of that.

In 1962, Ray had made the first tribute album to Bob Wills. Ray sang Bob Wills songs, but he did it with a Cherokee Cowboy sound, the shuffle beat. I listen to that album at least once a month, even to this day. Ray was having constant radio hits: "Night Life," another Willie Nelson song, was the big hit. "Make the World Go Away," "Pride," "Heartaches by the Number." And then, after I joined the band, "The Other Woman." We started traveling coast-to-coast. All during that fall we played, and I was really, really grooving on the band. We played the Midwest and these big package shows.

ONE DAY AFTER A GOLF GAME in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Buddy Emmons decided to jump off the second floor of the Holiday Inn just to see if he could do it. Had his shirt off. Perched on the railing of the second floor. Kept saying, "I'm going to jump." Had his pants on and his cowboy boots. No shirt.

We hadn't really become good friends yet. He didn't know me too well, and I kept my distance from him because he was the Big E, the big man, the go-to steel player in Nashville. I was having dinner at the coffee shop, and he sent in the band boy to get me. Said, "Big E wants to see you." I said, "Tell Big E to go fuck hisself." He said, "What?" I said, "Go tell him I said that." I'd been around Buddy long enough to figure out that he didn't like that worship shit.

The kid came back, said, "No kidding, Buddy really wants to see you." So I went up in his room, and he told me what he was going to do.

He said, "I'm going to jump off of the balcony." I said, "Well . . ." He said, "How high up do you think it is?" I said, "It's at least thirteen feet, probably better." So he went out on the balcony. Perched hisself up, and I went back inside the room and shut the door. I said, "Ignore him, guys, ignore him." And when we shut the door, he knew he had to be chickenshit and come back inside or he had to jump. We didn't leave him an alternative.

He kept saying, "Honest to God, boys, I'm really going to do it." We ignored him. Charlie Harris was in the room. Red was in the room,

the band boy, Darryl McCall, and myself. Price was back in his room. Silence.

All of a sudden we hear this thud. He jumped. And nobody ran out, nobody rushed out to him. We waited, like, twenty minutes. He doesn't have a shirt on. We're thinking, maybe he went to the bus. But if he went to the bus, he'd be back by now. I'm wondering where in the hell he's at. So we go take a look. Peeked out the door. He was laying on the ground, on his back, he's looking up, and he pointed at his leg and he said, "Honest to God, boys, I'm really hurt." I said, "Don't fall for it. He's going to jump up and run around, and we're going to look like fools. Let's blow him off."

We go back in and sit. By now it's really cold outside. Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in the late fall. Twenty more minutes goes by. We go back out and look. He's still lying there. "Boys, I'm really hurt." We go down, and we can't get his boot off because his ankle is swollen so much. His legs aren't that big around anyway, and we couldn't get his boot off. He said, "John, what do you think?" I said, "Your ankle's broke." He said, "No shit." I said, "Yeah, those high-heeled boots and you jumped thirteen feet down to the ground." He said, "What do you think I ought to do?" I said, "We'll take you to the emergency room."

They got Buddy in the wheelchair, and they got his foot propped up. Still had the boot on. He was doing his impersonation of Lionel Barrymore on the TV show *Dr. Kildare*. But I knew he was in pain by the way he began to sweat. So this nurse comes out. He said, "Where are you taking me?" She said, "X-ray." And she wheeled him right quick and just slammed that ankle into the wall at the corner of the hallway. He went, "YEEEZUS CHRIST!" Then he said, "Well, if it ain't broke, it's broke now."

Sure enough, it was broke. They put him in a cast. We still hadn't told Price. We're in the middle of a tour. There's no way in hell he can play pedal steel guitar with a cast plumb almost up to the knee. I said, "How we gonna tell the old man? Wasn't no accident. He did it on purpose."

So I'm elected. I walked in, and Price and Linda were having it out on the phone. They fought constantly: on the phone, at home. I don't know what about. That's how I wrote "Jealously Insane." Because of them two.

I said, "Ray, you may want to hear this while you have Linda on the phone." He said, "What is it, son?" I said, "Buddy Emmons just

broke his leg." He said, "Oh, Linda, you want to get on the plane and come pick up Buddy." After he hung up he said, "How did it happen?" I said, "He jumped off the balcony." He said, "You know where we can find Jimmy Day?" I said, "I know where he's at." So he called Linda back and said, "On your way, pick up Jimmy Day. Bring Jimmy Day and take Buddy home."

Of course, Jimmy's dead now. But to me, to this day, nobody can play steel for Price but Buddy or Jimmy. Many have tried, but they're the only two.

THE SHOWS IN AUDITORIUMS had their own sound systems, but there were no monitors. Imagine playing a 10,000-seat auditorium, and the people could hear the singer, but all the musicians had was our amps, and they weren't miked. From maybe fifty feet away, you couldn't hear the band. If you were in the back of the room, you got what they called a slap back. You'd hear a rim shot, and you'd hear it maybe three more times before it got back to you. It was really difficult for me to play a show, because I couldn't hear and Ray was constantly changing the tempo. In your job as a drummer, tempo is counted and held. That's your job. People like Ray Price and Bob Wills, if they felt like changing it, they wanted you to read their mind. I watched Price's right elbow when he was playing his guitar and if I saw his elbow begin to speed up, I'd pick it up.

That was my college education, working for Price: crowd psychology, how to handle a crowd, how to keep the music going. We'd go out and work Monday nights, Tuesdays—unheard of today. The only man I know in the country business today that can go out any night of the week and pack a house is Willie Nelson. It don't matter a damn what night it is.

When I went to work for Price, he was working for anywhere from six hundred fifty to eight hundred dollars a night. He only paid the musicians in the band twenty-five dollars a night. There was five of us. We didn't call our shows "concerts." If you said the word "concert," that meant you were going to see a symphony. That word was not used in country circles.

Back in the forties, one act in a schoolhouse auditorium could be a country show. Every other Saturday night, the stars had to be back at the Grand Ole Opry to play for union scale. Some of them guys would

have to drive 500 miles to get back to play that fuckin' Opry. But in the era before TV, if you were on the Opry, it meant something. Where else could you get radio exposure on a 50,000-watt clear-channel station? There was a time when it was worth it to an artist to be a member of the Grand Ole Opry. There's fifty-two Saturdays in a year. When you signed a contract, you had to give up half of those or you were fired from the Opry.

Well, when some of these hillbillies started making money, like Price and Webb Pierce and Faron Young and Jim Reeves, it wasn't real feasible to cancel a job where they could have six hundred or eight hundred or a thousand a night to come back to the Opry in Nashville. By then, every country station in the world was playing their records. Price quit the Opry about the time I went to work for him. They don't have that rule today. One night when she came back after a two-year absence, Dolly Parton said, "I'm surprised they haven't kicked my ass out of here." She said this, I didn't.

In the 1950s a man by the name of A. V. Bamfort come up with a bright idea to put on a package country show. A. V. Bamfort was a Cuban Jew who stood about four feet tall and looked kind of like the way Little Jimmy Dickens looks now. At this time, rock and roll was beginning to kill country music. His idea was to have ten, fifteen, twenty acts for a ninety-nine-cent ticket. Find a 10,000-seat auditorium and fill it, fill it to the brim. Nothing attracts a crowd like a big crowd.

A. V. Bamfort was the daddy of the package show. He was also the daddy of having Hank Williams get married twice onstage at Municipal Auditorium in New Orleans, once for a matinee and once again for a night show. He filled the auditorium up twice.

Probably the biggest package show we ever played was in New York in 1964. Ralph Emery and George Jones both talked in their books about it; it was supposed to be the biggest country-music show of all time. The show, which was held at Madison Square Garden, was so big and so long, it had three stages, side by side. When one band was in the spotlight, another band was tearing down and another band was setting up.

Ralph Emery was the emcee, and everybody was on that show, two songs per act. Buck Owens, Ray Price, George Jones, Carl Smith, Bill Monroe, Leon McAuliffe, Dottie West, Don Gibson, Jimmy Dean—

just about everybody who was anybody in Nashville at the time was on the bill. Of course, it ran overtime. The promoter had to pay an ungodly overtime fee to whichever union it was that pulls the ropes onstage. I don't know what they call them. Very tight union in New York.

So we went all the way up there to New York for two songs, then it was back to the hotel. We had heard that Gene Krupa was at the Metropole, a jazz club in New York. Me and Pete Burke, the bass player, ran back to the hotel, took off our red and blue rhinestone feathers, and put on our civvies. We were proud to wear the Cherokee Cowboys uniform, but we were in New York, and we were going to go dig Krupa, my childhood hero of the drums, with a quartet. We didn't want to be seen downtown wearing that uniform.

The Metropole was a little bitty place with the bandstand behind the bar. Krupa's hair was salt and pepper, more salt than pepper. And he was just playing his ass off. Eyes closed, rocking back and forth, and doing that thing on the high hat on the two and four beat. A black swing drummer, Cozy Cole, played during Krupa's intermissions.

Well, me and Burke paid our way in. There was minimum to sit at a table. You get so many drinks, you know, and then they run your ass out. We're sitting at the table, and we see Little Red Hayes, the fiddle player, at the bar, drunk on his ass. He was still in his Cherokee Cowboys uniform. You could spot him from a mile off. When the lights were on Krupa, you could still see his rhinestones and eagle feathers shining. He's at the bar, and I mean he's pouring them down.

Krupa stops, and Cozy Cole comes on to do his set. At some point Red turns around, sees me and Pete, and in this loud voice says, "Hey, fellers, Krupa sure sacked that nigger, didn't he?" ("Sacked" was the term we used when someone got the better of someone else at a jam session.)

The table wasn't big enough for us to crawl under.

We all loved jazz. Sometimes after a show, these jazz musicians would want to sit in with us, or we'd go out to a club and sit in, and Buddy and Charlie would cut these guys to ribbons. I mean, we played "Crazy Arms" and "Heartaches by the Number" with Price, but we could do other things, and they knew it.

Some jazz musicians still don't get it. Why play five notes when one will do? There's a steel player here in San Antonio named Tommy Detamore who says that jazz is nothing but "a bunch of bad notes all in a row." I wouldn't say they are bad, but they are all in a row.

USUALLY, the band would be on the road for three months of one-nighters—that's ninety one-nighters. On a tour that long, seasons change before you get back home. I have to say Ray was great to work for, even though he caused more trouble than the band did. It seemed like he was only happy when there was some shit going on. He'd say, "Boys, let's have some Chinese food tonight." We'd go to a Chinese joint. We didn't know what Chinese food was. Ray would say, "Let me order." He'd order all this great stuff. We loved it. We'd eat. He'd get the check and split it up, and we'd have to chip in. He never picked up a tab. Willie would always pick up the tab. I never saw Ray pick up the tab.

We had a night off one time in Paris, France. Of all places to turn a bunch of Cherokee Cowboys loose! Ray bought a humongous bottle of champagne. It was three feet tall—mostly glass, I'm sure—but he ordered it, and they chilled it and brought it out, and we drank every damn drop of it. And when it come time to pay the tab, we just got up and left. Hung him with it for a change.

But while I can't remember Ray ever picking up a tab, he always paid us after a gig, no matter how light the crowd was. It was never one of these "I'd like to pay you, but I didn't make it, so catch you down the road." I've never done that to my band either. When I was carrying the thirteen-piece swing band in the '80s and '90s, shit, it was tight some nights.

It might seem like my attitude toward Ray is kind of ambivalent. If that means I love him, I do. He's like an uncle. A few years ago we worked together at the Fort Bend County Fair outside of Houston. That was the first time after a show he ever come out on my bus, walked through my door, into my domain, and said, "I enjoyed it, let's do it again." Darryl McCall was also on that show, and he did three songs that Ray does on his show. But it wouldn't have mattered if Darrell had done Ray's whole show. It wouldn't have mattered; they got to see the old man.

Ray Price has several sides, but despite himself, he's a good guy. He's basically a real country guy. But he went to college. A lot of country singers were uneducated, but Ray wasn't. He was going to be a veterinarian until he met Hank Williams.

If you were on his team, he'd go all out for you if he was there. By the same token, he would take off in December and go hunting at the

King Ranch. It didn't seem to even enter his mind that there were five other guys with wives or old ladies or kids back in Nashville who had no income. But when he got back, you could call him up and say, "I need a hundred dollars." "How bad do you need it, son?" "I need it pretty bad." "Let me see what I can do. Come on out to the house." And he'd loan you the money.

RAY USUALLY PLAYED the same set night after night unless it was a new song. "The Other Woman" he learned in a motel, and we started playing it on the jobs to work it out and get an audience reaction to the song. Other than that, "San Antonio Rose" was the opener and still is, and boom, boom, boom to the finish line.

But sometimes we had some surprises for Ray. A year after I joined the band, we had a show in Edmonton, Alberta, on Labor Day weekend. I'm driving the bus, and Buddy Emmons is riding shotgun. He says, "I just thought of something. You've been with the band a year now." I said, "That's right." He said, "Why don't we present you with a pie or a cake." I said, "Nope." He said, "No, no. I'll walk up to the microphone, and I'll have the pie or the cake, and I'll tell Ray that it's your one-year anniversary with the band. When you come forward, you trip and fall into the cake or the pie. The old slapstick bit."

I said, "How 'bout if you get Charlie Harris to tell Ray it's my anniversary with the band, and I'll look real surprised. I'll walk to the microphone. You get somebody in the wings to hand it to you, then you come out and trip and hit me upside the head."

"Great. That's what we'll do."

So we went and bought cans of shaving cream—it looked like icing—and we made this big cake on a big pie plate. Now Ray, he's doing his show. He's focused. We didn't let nobody in on the spoof but Charlie Harris, Buddy, and I—kept it a total secret.

Right in the middle of Ray's act, Charlie goes and taps Ray on the shoulder, and Ray is totally spooked. This is a 10,000-seat auditorium. And Charlie says, "Chief, did you know that Johnny Bush has been with us a year tonight?"

You could see the color drain from Ray's face. His train of thought had been interrupted. He said, "No, I hadn't thought about it." Charlie says, "Well, the boys and I have chipped in and got him a little something. We thought we'd present it to him during the show." Ray steps

back, and I get up off the drums to go forward. I'm walking to the microphone like "Gee, fellows, thanks!"

Buddy comes up with this huge mound of cake with the shaving cream, and we should have rehearsed it better because he tripped and threw a body block into me with his shoulder. I didn't know he was going to hit me that hard, and I went "Ah!" The cake hit me right in the face. I'm sucking that shaving cream into my nose and my mouth, and I'm coughing and thinking that he broke a rib because he hit me so hard and it's a wonder he didn't knock me down.

The crowd goes wild, pandemonium for two or three minutes. What is it about a pie in the face that always gets a laugh? I looked over at Buddy; he's doubled up he's laughing so hard. The crowd is screaming and yelling, and I'm wiping that shit out of my eyes. Ray was laughing so hard that he was actually crying. Tears were rolling down his face, and he's stomping his feet, and he's slapping his leg. I thought if anything that he'd have been pissed off. I'm standing there, and I'm really in pain, bad pain.

Ray comes to the microphone and says, "Well, son, did you make a wish?" And I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "What is it?" I said, "I kinda wish he hadn't done that." The place erupted again.

Afterward Ray calls us into his dressing room. Here it comes, I thought. "Boys," he said, "keep that in the act while we're up here. I'll pay for all the stuff." Big-hearted Ray. You know, a thirty-five-cent can of shaving cream. What do you do? That's the way it was. It was just something to smooth the bumps out of the road.

We played all the way across Canada through Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, New Mexico, El Paso, Springfield, Illinois—took two days to get there—then back to Nashville. What we were playing when Ray wasn't on the bandstand was kind of country swing. We played "Caravan," "Cherokee," plus some Andy Williams, we done whatever we wanted to do. But we couldn't wait for Price to get out there. I mean, you could just feel it in the air when he hit the stage, the excitement and the electricity. His set was fun to play. It was just as exciting to me to play "Crazy Arms" and "San Antonio Rose" as it was to play "Cherokee" and "Caravan." And you'd better be playing. If you didn't, you didn't work for Ray Price.

WHEN WE GOT BACK HOME it was wintertime—dead of win-

ter—Christmas time. And Ray took off. While I was gone, Janice had repainted the apartment, sent her son to school. I would wire her money through Western Union. Sometimes it would be nine or ten days before Ray would pay us. I'd wire Janice some money, send my daughter some money, and that'd leave a little bit for me for a hamburger or something to drink. Back then, diesel fuel was eleven cents a gallon, a hamburger was a quarter. Ray paid for motels, but we had to pay for our own cleaning. You get kind of rank when you are doing one-nighters. You took them eagle feathers off quick.

Some acts, like Johnny Cash and Buck Owens, got too big for the package shows. Johnny Cash was the first one to really break into the big money, and then Buck Owens in the middle sixties was demanding and getting twenty-five hundred a show. We just all fell out laughing when we first heard that. We thought no damn hillbilly was worth that kind of money. But he was getting it.

So the ninety-nine-cent ticket fell by the wayside and the package shows became smaller. There'd be one headliner and maybe three fillers.

And that's when it dawned on me, sitting back there on the drums, watching these filler acts like Justin Tubb and Earl Scott, who came out, played twenty minutes and got paid two hundred fifty or three hundred dollars. I'm back there on the drums, writing songs and wanting to record, and I felt like I could do a better show than what I was hearing out front opening for Ray. I'm back there comparing my twenty-five dollars to their three hundred fifty, and they only done twenty minutes. I felt like I could do as good a job as they did. Marty Robbins was driving around Phoenix in a delivery truck with his radio on, and he heard some guy singing on some station there and said to himself, "Hell, I'm better than that." So he went up and talked to the program director, sang for him, and got the job.

That's kind of what I was thinking. What am I doing playing drums night after night when I can be recording and singing and making the bigger money?

AT THIS TIME, I was still married to Jean, but I would introduce Janice as my wife. I was stupid in many ways. According to Tennessee law, to the best of my understanding, Janice probably was my common-law wife. We had a checking account together. She used my last name

and the whole bit. It was kind of parallel to Willie's situation. The difference is, he actually married.

And then I met Mary Lou back in Texas.

At first it was just something that happened on the road. And then I got to seeing her more often. She started showing up at our shows whenever we came to Texas. If we played Houston, she'd meet me in Houston. If we played Corpus, she'd meet me in Corpus. Midland and Odessa, and it's just like it always happened. And pretty soon I fell in love with her.

Now what? I'm married to one, I've got another one in Nashville, but I'm in love with this third one.

Is this getting confusing? It was to me.

Can a man be in love with two women at the same time? You're damn right he can. At least I could. In fact, several at the same time. It was the old pattern, from one to the other to the other.

Jean, my first wife, finally filed for divorce. Mary Lou lived in San Antonio and read about it in the paper. She called while I was on the road. She said, "Your divorce is final today." I said, "Oh, really. How so?" She said, "It's in the paper. Now we can get married. I can go to Nashville with you, right?" The only thing I could do was to act real pissed off and start a fight. There already was somebody in Nashville. She didn't know about Janice.

I think Janice really loved me. That's why she stayed with me so long, even though we were never married. And she was isolated and she didn't know about the other women because she was so far removed from the scene in Nashville. When I was in Nashville, I was a good boy, stayed at home. It was only on the road that I went crazy.

So I had to choose. Years later Willie wrote a song called "Why Do I Have To Choose?" It makes a man think: why can't I have two women? I think a lot of men feel that way. But you can't get a woman to buy it. At least I never could.

I'm not proud of what I did next. I went back to Nashville, and I knew I had to make a decision. I knew I had to straighten out my rowdy ways, and like I said, I'm not proud of this. I picked up Janice, her clothes, her boy, and took them back to her mother's house in San Antonio. I didn't tell her that there was somebody else, just that it was over between us. Just like that.

She took it rather well, I thought, to a point to where it almost pissed me off. There were no tears, there was no fight, it was just si-

lence. It was the longest trip from Nashville to San Antone I ever took in my whole life. And on top of that it come a blizzard between Memphis and Little Rock. We had to go to Forrest City, west of Memphis, and check in to a motel, it was snowing so hard.

That was the last time we slept together. I didn't touch her. She laid there. Oh, the pain I caused her. And I felt guilt, I felt remorse. Part of me still loved her as much as I always did. The other part loved Mary Lou, and then there was a different love I still had for Jean, the mother of my daughter.

An all-knowing God knew that one day I'd straighten out. But at the time I didn't know it, and I felt, and rightly so, that I was a sorry son of a bitch to do something like this. Get this girl's hopes up, take her to Nashville . . .

But at the same time, everything I told her, when I told her, I meant it. It's like when Barbara Walters asked Willie that time on national television, "Do you still smoke pot?" He said, "No, I quit."

Two or three days later we're playing golf, and he lights up. I said, "What is this? I thought you quit." And he said, "Well, when I told her that, I had quit." Willie's funny.

But I went to San Antonio, dropped Janice off, and never saw her again. Picked Mary Lou up and took her right straight to Nashville. We set up housekeeping, and I never felt such strong guilt in my life. It was like Janice had died and I was in mourning.

I really don't know why I chose Mary Lou over Janice. She looked different. It was something I had to do. I don't know why, but I had to do it. Seemed like Janice was the cause of me splitting up with Jean, so part of my guilty conscience might have been trying to put the blame on her: "She's the culprit, not me. She's the culprit; I'm not going to marry her." Mary Lou was innocent. She wasn't part of my breakup with Jean. See what I'm saying?

What I couldn't see was that I was repeating the pattern from my childhood that I hated, because it had hurt my father and me and my brother and all concerned.

A few weeks after I had moved to Nashville, I was in Houston on a gig with Willie, and Willie said, "You better come down to my room right now." I went down to his room and he said, "I just talked to Shirley. She just talked to Mary Lou."

I said, "Yeah?" Willie said, "She went through your closet." "Yeah?" "She wants to know who Janice is."

Johnny Bush with his second wife, Mary Lou, Nashville, Tennessee, 1966.

What can I tell you? I felt fear. FEAR is the word. If the readers of this book want to know how I felt about the situation of me screwing around, what I was feeling at that moment was fear, *total fear*.

I looked at Willie and he shook his head and said, "She knows, man. She knows."

I went back to my room and I called her and she was very calm. I said, "So, what do you need to know?" She said, "Well, I'm waiting." I said, "Well, I met this lady, and we were going together, and we both agreed to disagree, and I love you, and if you leave, I'll understand." I lied about the whole scenario.

And Mary Lou said, "I meant what I said. I love you and I'll be here when you get here."

She had a way out and didn't take it. When I got back to Nashville, we got married. We went to Willie's house and got married in January '66.

Not that it stopped me from screwing around, or even really slowed me down.

THE SOUND OF A HEARTACHE

I can hear the sound of a heartache
From the music that the jukebox plays so loud
I can hear the sound of a heartache
Above the noise of happy people in that crowd

—"THE SOUND OF A HEARTACHE," WRITTEN AND RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

YOU KNOW, I DRINK, and in my day I've taken a few pills and I've smoked some pot. I've never seen heroin. I've never seen anybody shoot up. I've never seen cocaine, as much as I've been around. It was alcohol and pills and marijuana.

George Jones thought he had to be a drunk and a screw-up because Hank did that. Hank and Lefty, they drank.

Bob Wills was a drunk before he ever made it to the big time. He would call it "bein' sick." When he got drunk, he'd stay drunk for weeks

at a time. And then it would take a long time to dry out. He would go to these flophouses and just lay around, "bein' sick."

Sometimes musicians can have huge egos and, at the same time, very little self-worth or self-esteem. That's a destructive combination right there. You're out there baring your soul to strangers. Nobody wants to fail. My gratification and satisfaction comes from having a nice crowd, a receptive crowd. That does it for me. But when you start experimenting with the music, trying to get into the music, not every gig is gratifying. The commercial end of it gets in the way, like if you're playing with a bad band but the money's good.

Around 1960 or '61 we had started taking uppers to make the music more interesting. The pills could make dull people interesting and make bad music sound good. The only problem is, the more of that stuff you take, the more you have to take. We'd kick it with caffeine to make it last longer. I was into what we called white crosses. They cost a dime apiece. Hell, you could get 'em from different musicians. A funny thing: A college kid's taking them for an exam, and nobody said anything. But let a musician take one and he's a dopehead. Never did understand that.

Ray didn't take pills, but the band did. In 1965 one of our guys called up a friend and ordered a thousand pills, white crosses. The friend showed up at one of our stops in Poth, Texas, right outside of San Antonio, and they split the pills up right then. The band bus headed to Corpus, where we had a gig the next day. I went back to San Antone and drove down to Corpus the following day for the gig.

In Corpus the guys got to jammin' all day long, takin' their pills. After the gig, they went back to the hotel. Well, hell, I left. Me and the bass player went back to San Antonio, intending to meet up with the band again in Bandera for another gig the next night. I get to Bandera, and I'm sitting there waiting in front of the club. No bus. Finally, here come two vans, them old Volkswagen vans, bad-lookin' shit hanging out the windows, clothes and everything.

It was the guys.

I said, "What in the hell?"

They said, "Better be glad you wasn't there."

They got busted for the pills. Keith Coleman, the fiddler player, was arrested, along with Jimmy Day and Charlie Harris. Everybody was busted but for me and the bass player. The state confiscated Ray's bus. They said, "That's our bus now." They took it out to King Ranch. They were stripping it to make damn sure they didn't find no pot on there.

Well, they found some pot. But I knew it wasn't any of ours because it was rolled in brown paper.

Ray's lawyer came down from Nashville. Price never said a word. He bought his own bus back at the auction. Nobody got fired. He took up for everybody and paid his lawyers to handle it. Nobody went to jail except overnight, and eventually they no-billed everybody. They didn't want the band. They were after Ray for reasons unknown.

I think the last of my pill-taking days was a year or so after this when me and Willie and Wade Ray were working Lubbock. We were working the matinee. You know how it is when you get too much to drink. You take those uppers, they'll sober you up. Me and Willie got drunk every day we were on the road. I don't know how the hell we lived through that. But when you're in your early thirties, you can get drunk every day and it don't bother you. You wake up, feel great. But we were working this matinee show. We had to work from one to three in the afternoon, and then that night from ten to midnight. It was a horrible thing. So we drank the whole time, just as fast as we could pour it down.

Well, I had to take some uppers, just like I had done a thousand times in my life, or I wasn't going to make it through the gig. Went back to the motel late that night, feelin' more awake and wide-eyed than a tree full of young hoot owls. Laid down to attempt to go to sleep. I looked down at the covers, and they were jumpin' off my chest, my heart was beating so hard. Scared the hell out of me. I never done it again. I figured that was a warning.

IT WAS RIGHT AFTER THE BAND BUST, in the fall of 1965, that I left Ray and rejoined Willie. I just felt it was time to break away from Ray. I wanted to record. I kept seeing these singers driving Cadillacs, making three hundred dollars a day, and I'm making thirty-five. When Ray finally cut one of my tunes, "An Eye for an Eye," every station started playing it.

I turned in my notice in, of all places, Edmonton. The same place where I got the pie in the face a year earlier. I told him what I wanted to do, why I was quitting; wasn't nothing personal. I said, "I'll give you a three-month notice. In that time you can find somebody you want. You've been good to me. I don't want to leave the swingingest band, but I got to go."

Ray said, "How can I help you?" I said, "The rest of this tour, be-

fore you come on, would you let me sing a few songs?" He said, "Yeah. I'll have Charlie call you up, and you sing a few songs."

I didn't think he'd ever do that. Ray knew I could sing. He'd have people over on the road: Bobby Bare, Skeets McDonald, Webb Pierce. And, of course, he was God, and he'd say, "I got a boy here you need to hear. John, come down here." And I'd get out a guitar and sing my songs to them. He kind of liked to show me off.

But I only sang with Ray one time onstage as a member of the Cherokee Cowboys: New Year's Eve in Tulsa. Charlie Harris was sick and couldn't make it, and I sang harmony from the drums on "The Other Woman," which he had just cut. That was the only time.

AT THIS TIME I had written maybe twenty songs, three or four of which were good enough to record. I went to Pete Drake—who had taken Buddy's place as the number one session steel player in Nashville—and he signed me as a writer with his publishing company, Window Music, and promised me a recording contract.

Meanwhile, Tommy Hill told me he could get me enough demo-singing work to keep me alive. I had first met Tommy at KONO radio in San Antonio, the same place where I met Lefty Frizzell at Al Rogers' live radio show. Tommy had worked with Webb Pierce and Jim Reeves, and he'd fronted the Cherokee Cowboys for Ray in the early days. He played fiddle and guitar and had written some hit songs for Webb Pierce.

In Nashville he worked for Starday Recording Studio. He'd throw me demo sessions for ten dollars a side. At the first demo session that I cut at Starday, all the musicians' wives showed up. I told Tommy that this was the first time I'd seen all the wives show up. He said, "That's because Dolly Parton is here." I said, "Who's Dolly Parton?" He said, "I'll introduce you." This was before she made that record "Put It Off until Tomorrow" and before *The Porter Wagoner Show*. She was fresh out of high school when she caught the bus to Nashville. She was trying to write and make it like all the rest of us.

When I heard her sing that night, I said, "She's going to be big." The only other female singer I liked at that time in Nashville was Connie Smith. So that's how I met Dolly, doing demos. If it was a girl song she sang it, and if it was a boy song, I sang it.

I couldn't live on demos, so I went to see Willie out at Ridgetop, his hog farm outside of Nashville. Actually, I went there to see if I could store some stuff in his garage.

He said, "You look down." I said, "Yeah." He said, "What's the matter? Why'd you leave Price?" And I told him, "I want to record. I want to do what you did."

He just kind of laughed and said, "I tell you what. Would you do ten days with me in Texas? I'll pay you $35 a day." I said, "Shit. Who do I have to kill, man?"

On that trip, I laid out my plans to Willie. I told him I wanted to record and to stay in Nashville, where I would be working with Tommy Hill. Up until that time, I had played drums on three albums with Ray Price: the *Love Life* album; the *Woman* album, on which he cut one of my songs, "An Eye for an Eye"; and the Cherokee Cowboy *Western Strings* album. So I had three albums with Price, and my name was circulating. I felt I was finally getting close to realizing my dream of stepping out front with a record deal.

Willie promised me that if I would come to work for him, he would put me in the studio. He said, "I will pay for the session. I will turn the red light on. The rest is up to you." And that's exactly what he did.

The reason Willie hired me to play drums was that those Texas drummers was killing him. Wade Ray played bass and Willie played guitar, and after Wade left, he hired Jimmy Day to play bass, but those house-band drummers couldn't play with Willie. There was just no way they could do it. So he asked me if I'd come back to play drums with him and he put a cherry on top for me: "If you'll do it, I'll put a record out on you."

Tommy Hill and Pete Drake had put Stop Records together. At that time, Pete was doing three sessions a day in Nashville. He was no Buddy Emmons or Jimmy Day, but he was a master of the gimmick, and very much in demand.

When it came time to do the session, Willie said, "Pick your musicians, but there's a catch. You're going to have to split a session with Jimmy Day."

I thought, "Shit. With Jimmy Day?" Jimmy didn't give a damn if he had a record out or not. Even though Jimmy and I were good friends and working the road together, it pissed me off. A session is at least four songs. I was only going to get to do two songs.

I thought, "A record goes out to radio stations and they're gonna see my name, Johnny Bush. A nobody. What's going to get their attention? If the song has Willie Nelson or Hank Cochran on it, two of the biggest songwriters of the day, at least the guy will listen to it."

That was my thinking. So I got a song from Hank Cochran and I got a Willie Nelson song.

Unfortunately, the Hank Cochran song was a hammered piece of shit. Hank is one of my dearest friends to this day. He has written some classics, like "I Fall to Pieces" for Patsy Cline. I thought he couldn't write a bad song.

But he could, and he gave it to me. It was so fucking bad I couldn't memorize it. I tried because I wanted Hank Cochran's name on the record as a writer.

Willie asked me, "Did Hank Cochran give you a song?" I said, "Yeah." "Well, let's hear it." I said, "You don't want to hear it. It's so fucking bad I can't learn it." He said, "Well, don't record it then." I went, "Whew! Thank you. I didn't want to piss you off." He said, "Piss me off? I'm going to turn the red light on. After that you are on your own, buddy."

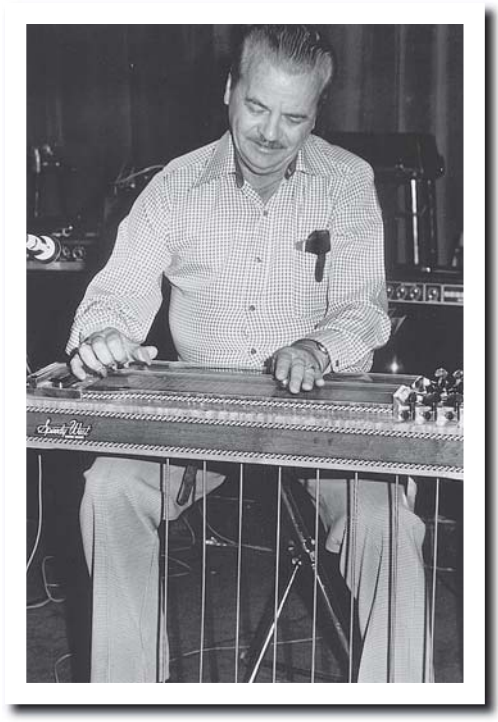
Willie picked up the phone and called Hank. I thought, "Oh, no. Oh, God!" Willie said, "Hank, what do you mean putting this piece of shit on my boy?" Hank laughed. He knew it was a piece of shit or he wouldn't have given it to me at that time.

I thought, "Well, OK, I'm going to do my tune, 'Sound of a Heartache.'" I'd got the idea for the tune when I was still with Easy Adams and the Texas Top Hands back in Texas. I finished it when I was with Ray.

The sound of a heartache, to me, is the sound of the pedal steel guitar. That's why in the song I say, "I can hear the sound of a heartache above the noise of happy people in the crowd." I can play drums, fiddle, guitar, bass guitar, and I can sing, but there's no way in hell I could ever play a pedal steel guitar. To me, it would take two brains. But from that day my uncle Jerry took me to that bar in Houston when I was a little kid and I heard "Steel Guitar Rag" coming out of the jukebox speakers, I have been in love with the sound.

The first steel guitar player that come through in a big way was Bob Dunn with the Light Crust Doughboys back in the 1930s. He had an acoustic guitar, put a pickup on it, raised the nut to elevate the strings, and played it with a bar. This was before the steel guitar as we know it today.

Leon McAuliffe with the Texas Playboys started off with an acoustic steel similar to Bob Dunn's. Then he went to a Dobro, then he went to a small solid-body electric steel guitar. In the early '50s he was among the first to use a Fender triple-neck steel guitar that had legs on it, but no pedals. After that, he went to a four-neck steel guitar.



Steel-guitar legend Speedy West.

As far as I know, Alvino Ray played the first steel guitar with pedals on it with his pop orchestra on the West Coast in the 1940s. The first pedal steel guitar in country was played by Speedy West, but Bud Isaacs popularized the pedal steel sound of the E-9th tuning on Webb Pierce's 1954 recording of "Slowly," written by my friend Tommy Hill. That revolutionized the country sound. Every steel player was trying to figure out how Isaacs slurred that note. They would slide the bar up and bend it sideways trying to get close to that sound.

Now most pedal steel guitars have two necks, two different tunings. There's ten strings on each neck, for a total of twenty strings. Then you've got ten pedals on the floor and seven knee pedals. Each one of these pedals raises or lowers the pitch of the strings, depending on how the player wants to set up. That's why one steel player can't go over to another's instrument and play. The tuning is the same, but the pedals are different.

My all-time favorite steel guitarists, Buddy Emmons and Jimmy Day, played double-neck instruments. One tuning would be an E-9th, the second ten-string neck would be a C-6th. If you're gonna play a

Bush's two all-time favorite pedal steel guitarists: Buddy Emmons (rehearsing with Bush on drums, 1965) above, *and Jimmy Day (performing with fiddlers Shorty Lavender and Tommy Jackson at the Grand Ole Opry, mid-1960s)* below.

country ballad like "Sound of a Heartache," you play E-9th. If you're gonna jazz it up like "Drivin' Nails in My Coffin," it's C-6th.

Buddy Emmons is the greatest steel guitar player that ever lived when it comes to touch, technique, tone. Jimmy Day was the master of the E-9th sound. He would listen to the lyric, try to visualize the painting you were trying to paint with words, and put the color in there. I still get chill bumps thinkin' about it. Buddy's good at the E-9th, too.

Sound of a Heartache is all Jimmy Day, except for the title track, and "A Moment Isn't Very Long," which was Buddy. Jimmy had broken his leg falling off a horse out at Willie's ranch—if you could call it a ranch—and his leg was in a cast, so he couldn't play. Buddy played steel guitar on Jimmy's session, too.

Buddy is incomparable. Nobody could ever play like Buddy as far as speed, taste, and technique. But nobody was better than Jimmy Day on a ballad. That's when he was straight. Jimmy could get screwed up with pills and vodka. Even though he quit drinking twenty years before he died, his pancreas was already gone. Plus, he smoked pot like other people smoked cigarettes.

Jimmy Day had been first call in Nashville and fucked it up. He'd walk in there with a vodka bottle in one hand and a 7-Up bottle in the other. Producer would say "Hey!" Jimmy would say, "Hey what? I'm Jimmy Day!" Producer said, "Well, fuck you, Jimmy Day!" Jimmy wanted to roar and party and be top gun. He didn't care about making a living until a few years before he died. Pete slid in behind Jimmy. He couldn't play a straight melody as well as Jimmy could, but he was sober, on the job, and could play sound effects and gimmicks.

Buddy Emmons probably could have had Pete Drake's gigs if he'd wanted them, but Buddy had an attitude. If he didn't like a song, he'd get up in the middle and walk out. Actually, I don't know if he ever did that, but he had an attitude. Buddy is honest almost to a fault. Money didn't mean that much to Buddy at this time. He liked playing on the road more than studios. Buddy had integrity, but you can't live on integrity.

If I went to Nashville tomorrow, I'd insist on Buddy Emmons playing steel or I wouldn't do it. Buddy is the greatest that ever lived, or ever will live. Everything that these guys are playing today, Buddy played thirty years ago. But these new producers don't know who he is and they don't care. Buddy was on a couple of cuts on the George Strait album *Pure Country*. He just played his ass off. But these new produc-

ers, they don't hear it. They don't hear the song. They don't hear the singer. They don't hear the sound of the steel.

For the past ten years Herb Steiner has been the steel guitarist with my band in Texas. On a live show, if you throw him a song he's never played before, he can be very innovative. He's actually better, in my opinion, on the C-6th tuning than the E-9th, but since we're doing more hard country than swing, his E-9th has improved 100 percent. Plus, he's one of the funniest guys I've ever met. I would rather have a team player who is dependable and takes pride in his appearance than one of these hotshots who show up drunk, late, and in a ball cap. Willie kind of changed the dress code, but on my shows I like a little more formality.

ANYWAY, my single came out on this tiny label called New Star that was owned by Pamper Music. It had my tune, "Sound of a Heartache," on the A-side and Willie's tune, "A Moment Isn't Very Long," as the B-side. I never cut a B-side in my life, intentionally. The record labels and the deejays did that. Even on my albums, they're all A-sides.

After the record came out, Willie calls me up and says, "Take a letter." What am I, his secretary? But, of course, I did it. It was to Hayes Jones, who booked Willie and Ray for Pamper Music, which also had a booking agency, Atlantis Artists. It was short and sweet. "Dear Mr. Jones, If Texas is the only place you can book me, I can do that myself. Consider me no longer available for dates. Yours truly, Willie Nelson."

After that we got Paul English to play drums, and I tried playing bass. I am not a bass player. When Willie would come up, he went from one song to another and kept modulating keys, and I couldn't hack it. So we hired a bass player, Eddy Rager, and put me up front with Willie's guitar to open the show. Then when Willie come up, I handed him the guitar and I went to the drums. It was working fine.

Now we needed a bus. Marty Robbins's old bus was for sale. He had sold it to some cowboy in Bandera, Texas, who didn't keep it long. Jimmy Day and I rode a Greyhound bus from Nashville to San Antone to pick up the bus and bring it back because we were both ace bus drivers from working with Price for so long.

I got pneumonia on that trip. I had a raging fever, 102. Between Memphis and Little Rock, these young blacks on the bus started passing a wine bottle and fighting. There was a woman sitting right in front of me—she looked old to me, she had glasses on—and these young guys

kept coming and screwing her in the seat. We like to never have got to San Antone.

When we got there, it was rodeo time. Crash Stewart, who later became my manager, picked me and Day up at the bus station. I'm sick, gobbling aspirin.

Mary Lou's parents doctored me a little bit, and they said, "Let's go out to the rodeo for a little while before you leave."

Max Gardner at KBER in San Antonio, who was voted the number one deejay in the country while I was with Ray, was doing a remote broadcast from the rodeo. He told me, "You know you got a hit record?" I said, "Me?"

He said, "'Sound of a Heartache.' I play it five or six times a day. Can't play it enough."

I said, "You're kidding me."

He said, "No. I've already talked to a lot of other deejays and reported it to *Billboard*. You're happening. You got a hit!"

All the way back home, man, I'm sicker than hell but I'm feeling *good*. When we get to Texarkana, we see Ray Price's bus pulled off in a restaurant parking lot. I wanted to say hello to Buddy Emmons and tell him the good news. But I was so sick I couldn't move, so Buddy came on our bus. He loves to see me in misery.

When we got to Nashville, I told Willie, "I'm happening." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "'Sound of a Heartache' is playing all over the place." He said, "Well, shit, let's look into this."

Some stations wouldn't play "Sound of a Heartache" because you couldn't buy it anyplace. We called Pamper and found out that Pamper just sent out a few copies and they weren't in the market to sell records. New Star was Pamper Music's utility label. Most publishing companies had them. If they thought a writer could sing, they would put out a single and just print up a few hundred. If it caught on, they would pitch it to a label for a real release. Pamper never really did try to get the records in the stores.

But I remember laying in the bunk in Willie's bus and listening to Willie's bus driver, Glen Jones, who was married to Helen Carter of the Carter Family, searching the dial for WHO, a 50,000-watt country station out of Des Moines, Iowa, where years earlier Ronald Reagan had been a sports announcer. Glen tunes it in, and the deejay says, "Here's a new record I'm real excited about by a newcomer named Johnny Bush."

I'm opening shows for Willie, and I'm getting as much airplay as he is! That's when Willie said, "It's time to do an album. We got a good single as a vehicle. Let's do an album and we'll peddle it to a label."

Willie set up my session in RCA's Little Victor studio in late 1967. Willie and Paul English and Jack Fletcher put up the money for it. But the same day before we did my session, we had to do an RCA session for Willie, who was signed to RCA. Me and Jimmy and Paul had to drive all night from San Antone to get back to Nashville in time for the session.

Chet Atkins was God at RCA. We were doing one of Willie's songs, "One in a Row": "You can truthfully say you've been true just one time / Well, that makes one in a row, one in a row, one in a row." Chet is riding my ass over the loudspeaker in the studio: "The drums aren't making it!" All the time, I know I'm playing it the way Willie wanted the son of a bitch played, a bolero-type beat, a slow rumba, for country records. I knew that's what Willie wanted.

Well, the morning session was in the Big Victor studio, right next door to the Little Victor where Elvis, Jim Reeves, and everybody cut their big hits. Willie had my session set up in Little Victor. He told me to hire my own pickers. He said, "I won't tell you who to hire or what to sing. Me and Hank Cochran will A&R [artists and repertory] the thing, but you're on your own."

I wasn't nervous. I wasn't trying to cut a hit album. I thought, "I'm Willie Nelson's front man. I got the best gig on the road. And I can sell this album off the bandstand for extra money to take up the slack."

I didn't try to get the first-call Nashville musicians. I got the guys that I had been working demos with for Tommy and Pete. Instead of getting Floyd Cramer, I got Jerry Smith on piano. On guitar I got a kid by the name of Jerry Reed. On drums I got Willie Ackerman, who later became the staff drummer on *Hee Haw*. I had done a lot of demos with these guys, and I knew how good they were, even if nobody else did. Of course, I had Jimmy Day on steel. And I got Junior Huskey on stand-up bass. He was the one who had the idea to put the heartbeats in "Sound of a Heartache": "*I can hear . . . the sound . . .* dum dum *. . . of a heartache . . .*" A natural heartbeat on the bass drum.

I found out early on if you give a good session picker his head, he

will come up with some great ideas. Do you know why A&R men like Don Law and Steve Sholes were so great? They kept their fucking mouths shut and they left the musicians to work it out and let the artist be the artist.

Chet, being a picker, thought he had to jump in there. Chet produced some hit albums, but not on everybody. Don Law produced everyone on Columbia: all the Ray Price hits, all the Lefty Frizzell hits, all the Marty Robbins hits. Don Law never once opened his mouth. Steve Sholes was another one. He let Elvis and Scotty Moore and D.J. Fontana do what they wanted to. Later, Scotty was my engineer on the Stop recordings and D.J. was my drummer. Elvis's drummer was my drummer!

That day at Little Victor, we'd play the song through the speakers, run it down once. Some guy would say, "Hey, let's try this." "Well that didn't work." "Hey, I know, let's put this on it." Just stand back and let these fantastic musicians have their way. It doesn't work every time, but eight chances out of ten it does work.

Like I said, it was Junior Huskey who had suggested to Willie Ackerman to play the heartbeats on "Sound of a Heartache." On "Farewell Party," Jimmy Day goes to modulate from F to G and goes from an F to A minor back F to a D7 to a G. That wasn't Jimmy's idea. That was Jerry Reed's idea, the guitar player. He could hear that in his head. It's one of my favorite Jimmy Day steel-guitar breaks, and it was Jerry Reed's idea.

I didn't have but five guys on the whole session. There's no fiddle on there. I was trying to hold the costs down, but also nobody was using fiddle then. Fred Carter, who played gut-string guitar on the session, his daughter Deana Carter is a star now. Blonde hair, runs barefooted. Deana, that is. Not Fred.

We done eight sides in a three-hour session. That's how tight we were. Willie and Hank Cochran sat behind the board and kept saying, "Give us another tape! Give us another tape! We've got a hell of an album here!"

Them guys had never heard those songs. I know because some of them I had written myself. Jerry Reed was also on Willie's session with Jimmy Day and I earlier in the day. Jerry evidently remembered Chet riding my ass, because after about the second song that we laid down at Little Victor, Jerry Reed turned around to me and said, "Go over there and tell Chet Atkins to kiss your ass."

After it was finished, I listened to the album at least a thousand times on headphones. I didn't want to embarrass myself. When you put

*You Ought to Hear Me Smile: Johnny Bush (*center*) with coproducers Pete Drake (*left*) and Willie Nelson (*right*), celebrating the release of Johnny's first record.*

an album out, you're saying the world is going to hear this. If it's bad or if it's good, you're really taking a chance. You can be the best singer in the world, but when you record an album and put it out there, you're up against everybody else that's got an album out there. What makes you think your album is any better than theirs? Because once it's out there, you can't take it back.

I said, "Yeah, OK, this is a good album." Not great, but good. I had no idea at that time that it would be the first cornerstone of my career. Everybody that had access to it—not necessarily the public, but musicians, deejays, critics—really liked it.

They did a single off of the album. They couldn't go with "Sound of a Heartache" because it had already been cut with New Star, and it got lot of airplay and opened the doors for me. So they went with another ballad, "You Ought to Hear Me Cry." Another ballad seemed to be what the deejays were looking for.

"You Ought to Hear Me Cry" was written by Willie. I was so excited. At that time I was completely content being Willie Nelson's front man and singing to these crowds. Even though I wanted a hit record, I didn't expect it to happen just like that. You have to be at the right

place at the right time. I was hoping that deejays would listen to the song because it had Willie Nelson's name as the writer, which I thought was going to help my record just to be credible.

But when the record come out, the label read "You Oughta to See Me Cry" by "Wiley Nelson," not Willie.

Pete Drake couldn't understand, when I called, why I was upset about it. He couldn't understand it.

I said, "Look at the goddamn label!" He said, "I've got it in my hand right here." I said, "Read it. It says 'You Oughta to See Me Cry.' The song is "You Ought To Hear Me Cry."

He said, "You're nitpickin'."

I said, "OK, how about Willie Nelson being 'Wiley Nelson'?"

I was really pissed. But the misprints didn't hurt the record at all. It went to the Top 20 on the *Billboard* chart on this little obscure independent record label. The second pressing had the titles and Willie's name corrected.

We'd be touring the country with Willie, doing twenty or thirty days at a time. At that time, WWL in New Orleans had a 50,000-watter, and there was WHO of Des Moines, Iowa. Glen Jones, Willie's bus driver, would be up there driving, and we'd be all in our bunks asleep and reading or whatever, and I could hear the radio, and I'd hear my record "You Ought to Hear Me Cry" two or three times a night. The record broke the Top 20. The guy at WHO said, "Yeah, you ought to hear him cry, but you ought to hear him sing."

I thought that was so nice of him to say that.

When I got back to San Antone, the first thing I bought was a Cadillac, a used one; the new one came later.

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UNDO THE RIGHT

If you can't say you love me, say you hate me
And that you regret each time you held me tight
If you can't be mine forever, then forsake me
If you can't undo the wrong, undo the right

—"UNDO THE RIGHT," WRITTEN BY WILLIE NELSON AND HANK COCHRAN, RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

HEN I REJOINED WILLIE on the road in 1966, he wasn't a big star yet, but I knew he was going to be. I *knew*. I'd seen the change years earlier when I heard him sing at the Terrace Club in Waco shortly after Jean and I moved back to San Antonio in 1959. I walked in the door of the club. Martha's waiting on tables, Willie was in the band, and I heard him sing. And I said, "My God, that ain't Willie!"

By the mid-'60s, when I'd joined his band for that trip to Vegas, he had really made a transition. Although he had not had any huge hits of his own, he'd written huge hits for other singers, like "Night Life," "Hello Walls," and "Crazy." And his singing had gotten 300 percent better.

He had matured to the point to where he was a genius, you know? He had a knack of facing a problem, cutting through the bullshit, getting to the heart of the matter, and making a decision. Nine chances out of ten the decision he would make would be the right one. So, I predicted he was going to happen. The only thing I couldn't predict was when.

Willie and I had talked a lot on that tour to Vegas in 1963, when he got married to Shirley. I could see then that he had changed a lot, mentally and emotionally. We still had the camaraderie of being old buddies from when we were kids just starting out in the music business. But he had matured. He was a pro. I was still trying to get going on my own. Willie felt like maybe I was worth saving. He said, "John, you're a negative thinker. So quit thinking negative!"

I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. I said, "I want to do such a good job that I'm afraid."

He said, "See, you're being negative. You're a good drummer. You're not Gene Krupa, but you're a good drummer." He said, "Do this. Find a goal and make that like a target. Aim high. Hell, if you only hit down here, look how much higher you are even if you miss. You're still way up there from where you started."

I'm thinking, "Wait a minute. He's got something here." I remembered what Willie said to Bill Green at the Nugget: "I'm going to do my show my way whether you like it or not, Bill Green." That would have scared me. "Yes sir, Mr. Green, whatever you say, Mr. Green"—that's what I had been taught all my life, you know.

But there comes a time when it's only you. Willie asked me, "How many people do you know, right now, if you died, who would get in that hole with you?" I said, "Well, nobody." He said, "Then why do you worry about what the fuck they think about you?"

I'm sure there's been times when Willie has worried what people thought about him. But he was trying to instill some confidence in me, to get me to quit thinking negative, to say, "Yes, you can do it. Don't matter where you're from, don't matter who your parents were."

I made one mistake. I said, "Willie, you're stronger than me." And, God, he jumped up off that bed, man, stomped his foot, and said, "No, I'm not!"

I think Willie was a better friend to me than I realized. He could have patronized me. He could have dried my tears. I went to his room to tell him I knew I wasn't getting the job done, that I'd try harder. This was his big break. I said, "I think enough of you that I want to see you really make it, and I don't want you just taking me along because we're

friends." You see where I'm coming from? And that's when he said, "You're a negative thinker. You've got to stop it." He stomped his foot. He said, "Quit it. You're playing good and you'll get better."

THERE WAS ANOTHER TIME, after I rejoined his band in 1966, when I went to Willie after I felt I had let him down. We had played Mineral Wells, Texas. It was my job in those days not only to front the band and road-manage the band but to check us into and out of motels, make payroll, collect the money. Willie never had to worry about anything. Willie had a knack, and he still does, of always having somebody with him that took care of things without him delegating or designating something to be done. He always had somebody, well, like me. I knew what had to be done. If we broke down somewhere, I'd never even wake him up. I would call a wrecker, find a diesel mechanic, get an estimate, rent a U-Haul, call the club, and then I'd go wake Willie up. He was never bothered with any of this crap.

I did that for several reasons. No. 1, I was paid to do it. No. 2, I loved Willie and I loved working for him and I wanted to do it. We'd check in a motel, and the first thing I'd do is carry his suit bag and his luggage to the motel room. Then I'd get everybody checked in, get my stuff to my room, go down to the bus, pick up his messages if he had any, put them on his pillow with his room key, and never wake him up. I've never had anybody do that for me. Never. We didn't let him carry anything. He didn't demand that kind of treatment. It was more like he commanded it.

We got to Mineral Wells, unloaded, set the band up. I couldn't find the microphone stand. We only had one. Couldn't find it. I'm thinking, "How in the hell can we play a gig without a mic stand?" I think I threw the mic cord over a rafter and the mic hung straight down. It was either that or Paul English rigged up an old cymbal stand. Anyway, we didn't have a mic stand.

After the gig, it was just Willie and me in the Lincoln we called the Batmobile. Willie was real, real quiet. I figured he was pissed at me. I pulled off to the side of the road, took a leak. We mixed a drink. I said, "Willie, I want you to know that I goofed. It was my fault we didn't have a mic stand. I know one day you're going to be as big or bigger than Dean Martin." (The reason I made a reference to Dean Martin is because at that time in the '60s Dean was the hottest thing going, record-wise, movie star–wise, plus he was the biggest thing on TV.)

Willie never said a word.

I said, "I know in my heart you're going to be the biggest thing that our business has ever seen, and I also know that I'll always have a job with you as long as I want it, and I also know that you will make a place for me even if you don't need me . . . you'll pay me to do something. I know that, but I want you to know right now that that's not what I want. I want to make it on my own. I don't want to be a guy hanging around waiting on a paycheck." I told him again, "It's my fault we didn't have a mic stand tonight."

I was really trying to tell him I was busting my ass for him. I got through my whole story, and I meant every word of it. All this time he never said a word.

I said, "I realize I got it coming, so if you want to chew my ass out go ahead." And I took a big drink.

He looked at me and said, "Are you through?" I said, "Yeah, that's it."

He said, "Well, I don't have to chew your ass out. You done a pretty good job of it yourself."

I MEAN IT WHEN I SAY that I think Willie is a genius. And I think what makes him a genius is his intelligence, if that's not being redundant. A genius can be an idiot, too, in other areas. As I stated before, Willie has a way of facing a problem head on, cutting through the bullshit, getting right to the heart of the matter, and making a decision just like that. What he can do is evaluate a situation real quick, and that's just a matter of genius.

Of course, there's also his writing ability, his singing ability and, to me, his guitar work. There hasn't been enough said about his guitar work. I can't think of anybody—Eldon Shamblin with the Texas Playboys, or any other great guitar player—who sounds like Willie or who Willie tries to sound like. It's a completely original style.

Add that to his voice, and it's phenomenal. I once heard him do two hours solo on the Capitol steps in Austin. Just him and his guitar, two solid hours of nothing but songs that he had recorded and written. It was televised. Never made one mistake. And some of these songs I've been singing now for twenty-five years, I still screw them up on the guitar nightly.

I've had long conversations with Willie on religion and philoso-

phy. Not too much on politics. I would say he would lean toward the left, but probably wouldn't give it a second thought if a right-winger approached him and asked him to do something he thought was right. He'd probably do it if he felt like it. He would never let that sway him one way or the other about doing something.

While we were still in the band together, Willie read Edgar Cayce and we both read Kahlil Gibran. *The Prophet* kind of got us started. Willie is a Christian, and there's nothing in the Bible about reincarnation, but he definitely believes in reincarnation. He believes that you pass from this life to the next life and you keep coming back until you get it right. You keep coming back until we are all like Christ. In other words, if you play a chord on the piano, say you're playing eight notes, a big Duke Ellington chord, it's beautiful. Boom. That's perfect harmony with the universe. We are at discord right now. We're not making the full chord because of karma or whatever. So we've got to keep coming back until we get it right.

In the summer of 1967, Marty Robbins and Ray Price were planning a big package show together. At the last minute, Ray had other things he wanted to do, so Marty Robbins called Willie Nelson and said, "Here's what I'd like to do. You want to go halfers with me?" And Willie said sure.

This was the lineup of talent: Marty Robbins, Willie and his band, Lefty Frizzell, and Bob Wills, who were both just working single then. This had to be '66 or '67. Can you imagine Lefty Frizzell and Bob Wills on the same show? Warren Smith was on the show, too, and Jan Howard and Hank Cochran and Jeannie Seely. We backed up all the acts except Marty.

At that time I was playing bass with Willie's band. He asked me to do it. I told him I wasn't a bass player, and I had to prove it to him. So it was my job to open the show and sing a song and make sure everything was right and introduce the acts. So I finally got to play with Bob Wills, but on bass, not drums, which was embarrassing (probably to Bob, also).

Before the show hit the road, Marty called Willie and said, "Hey, there's a new guy out there that's got a pretty good record that's getting pretty good play. I think if we add him, it would really help the show."

Willie said, "Who is it?"

Marty said, "Charley Pride."

"Never heard of him."

Marty didn't tell Willie that Charley Pride was black. I guess it didn't matter to him. Of course, this was back before MTV and country-music magazines, when it could be months or years before you knew what a singer looked like.

So we got to Dallas, the first stop, at the Dallas Coliseum. Pride come in with his manager, Jack Johnson, and we all saw that he was black. The only thing that bothered me was . . . this was Dallas, and this is in the '60s, man! I mean, we were still in the South. I thought, "Jesus Christ! Prepare to duck!" I mean, you know what they did to Kennedy in Dallas.

So I sang a song, and then it was time to announce: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Willie Nelson and Marty Robbins show! It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you at this time a man who's really making a name for himself in country music, Country Charley Pride!"

Everybody went, "Yaaaaay!"

When they saw him, they just stopped. I mean, it was quiet out there. Pride had beads of sweat poppin' out of his forehead. He was scared, too, I'm sure.

He come to the microphone, took his handkerchief out. It was deathly quiet. Jimmy Day looked at him. "Well, are you gonna sing, or what?" He wiped his face, put his handkerchief back in his pocket. It seemed like this took forever. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I know I look strange to y'all. But don't let this permanent tan fool you. I'm a country singer."

The place exploded with applause!

He said, "My favorite artists are Ray Price, Jim Reeves, and Connie Smith."

Standing ovation!

He sang "Crazy Arms," and I joined him on the Ray Price harmony. The crowd went apeshit! Wouldn't let him off the stage.

They had him opening, right? Not after that night. They didn't dare put him on first.

So we're making our dates around Texas. Played Sam Houston Coliseum in Houston. Same package. Charley come out singing "Crazy Arms," and I joined him on the tenor. There's a black man singing country! People would go nuts! I mean, you wouldn't have believed it.

So we get to Fort Worth. For years, we'd played Fort Worth at a

place called Panther Hall. And it was always the policy of the owners, Corky and Bill Kuykendall, that the act that played that night had to do an afternoon, thirty-minute live television show. It was in the contract.

We had the Willie Nelson–Marty Robbins show over at Will Rogers Coliseum. So Corky come over and said, "We got Tony Douglas and his band, the Shrimpers, at Panther. You reckon you can get some of the acts to go over and sing a song with 'em on TV?"

Jeannie Seely said, "I will." I said, "I will, and I'll bring somebody else with me, too."

So Jeannie Seely and I and Jack Johnson and Charley Pride went over there, along with Jimmy Day. We went through the back door. Kuykendall said, "No. You ain't gonna put the black man on." I said, "Corky, let me tell you something. This guy's dynamite."

He said, "I don't care. It's Tony Douglas's show, and he's not gonna have no nigger on his stage." He was trying to put it on Tony, who wasn't even aware that Charley Pride was there.

So I was between a rock and a hard place. They called me up to do two numbers. I knew they couldn't do nothin' to me because I worked for Willie Nelson and they wasn't gonna fire him. We worked Panther Hall maybe six times a year. So I said, "I'm gonna do it. What the hell."

The kiss heard round the world: Willie Nelson, Charley Pride, and Johnny Bush, at the Hemisfair (world's fair) in San Antonio, 1968.

Instead of doing the second song, I introduced Charley. He sang "Crazy Arms," and the people in the live TV audience went apeshit.

When I came off the stage, Jack Johnson shook my hand and said, "Johnny, I really thank you for that. We need to work Panther Hall. I think this might do it."

I said, "If they don't run me out of town first."

I have a photo of Willie kissing Charley, with me standing next to them, backstage at the world's fair in San Antonio in 1968. It is in this book. He kissed him onstage a few times as well. (I think he's got a thing for black people . . .)

Seriously, we all knew that Charley was gonna become the first black man to make it big in country music. He sang great, he looked great, he was intelligent, and he had a shrewd manager, Jack Johnson.

A few years later, Charley Pride was a megastar. I guess he was probably the first mega-country star. Probably more so than Johnny Cash. He was packing places, just Charley, no package. When he'd walk onstage, they'd give him a standing ovation before he did anything.

THAT SAME SUMMER, Mary Lou and I moved back to Texas. The whole band, except for Willie, lived in Texas. Ninety percent of Willie's dates were in Texas, and we got tired of driving from Nashville to Texas and back two or three times a month.

All through this time, I continued to run around on the woman I was married to. It just never occurred to me to change. In every town there'd be women. I don't know how many women I slept with. I hate that term because usually we didn't sleep at all.

How many one-nighters? Thousands, I guess. Not thousands of different women, but the same ones a bunch of times. When we played Texas, we had a group of fans who would follow us to every job around the state. Today, you would refer to them as groupies. Most of them were in love with Willie. But there was a group of girls, four of them, that called themselves the Bush Brigade. They had uniforms with "BB" stitched on the blouse. I was banging every one of them. Willie said, "That son of a bitch has his own harem."

Some nights the hotel phone would ring, and some guy would invite us to his room. "Hey, we're having a party. Come on down." His girl would call a girlfriend. Now there'd be two girls, and next thing you know they're getting it on with the whole band. That was nothing. I never said no. The guilt came later.

My God, if I was young and promiscuous now like I was then, I probably would have gotten AIDS. On two occasions on the road I had to go get shots. One time was in Fort Worth when I was working with Willie. My job involved going to Pamper Music once a week to pick up Willie's mail. I was keeping the books and answering his mail.

One day Mary Lou went over to Pamper to pick up the mail instead of me. She said, "You got a letter today." I said, "I did?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Did you read it?" She said, "Yeah, I read it." But before I could start lying, she said, "She's not an old girlfriend. She just said that she likes you and Willie and she comes to Panther Hall all the time and she's just an admirer."

I thought, "I'm ashamed of what I am about to do." I said, "What's her phone number, 'cause I'm going to call her and tell her that I'm married and to quit writing me shit like that and getting me in trouble."

So my wife gives me her phone number. Well, I immediately called her, and she comes out, and I spent the night with her that night in Fort Worth. The next night was Wichita Falls. She went over to Wichita Falls with us.

The third day I felt a burning sensation. I said, "Hey, Willie, I think I got the clap."

He said, "Really?"

I said, "Yeah, I really do."

I asked him, "As much fucking around as you do, why don't you ever get it like this? This is the third time this has happened to me."

He said, "It's very simple. I only fuck married women."

I said, "What's worse? The clap or a bullet?"

When we got to San Antone, I went to a doctor, and he runs a lab test. I said, "You're wasting good money. I know what I got." So he shot my ass with a million units of penicillin and told me not to drink and to stop fucking around. He said when we got to Midland two days later, I should go to another doctor and get checked and, if necessary, get another shot.

Later in life, I found out that doctors really don't care enough to get mad if you don't take their advice. How many times have you heard people say, "Boy, if my doctor knew what I was doing he'd sure be mad." No, he wouldn't. It's up to you to get well.

But this is that one exception. I got to Midland, picked a doctor at random, went to his office. He chewed me out for thirty fuckin' minutes. Said I was a sorry piece of shit and don't you know . . . I mean, he read me the riot act.

I almost got mad. "Look, I didn't come in here for a lecture."

"Well, you're getting one whether you want it or not." He didn't know me from Adam, but I got a lecture.

And I said, "Do I need another shot?"

He said, "I'm going to give you another shot just so some creep like you won't spread it any more." I think he used a dull needle, because when he popped me in the ass, man, it hurt.

Women always liked the singers. I don't know if it's because they're in the limelight or because people consider the entertainer as "somebody," and being with him makes them "somebody," but it's always been that way. Maybe it's because when a guy steps up to the microphone and sings, "I love you," women think he's speaking directly to them. That's what every woman wants to hear, and so many macho guys have a hard time relating their feelings to a woman.

Years before Presley, Lefty Frizzell had the same effect and charisma that Presley had. He was good-looking, curly-haired, wore a Nudie suit, and the women would just flip out. Hank Williams had women, and you couldn't classify him as being pretty by no stroke of the imagination. Willie's no Robert Redford either. But the women think he is. He has *charm*.

My lifelong fascination with women has caused me a lot of trouble because that temptation is there, and you're out there, and it's at night, and some good-lookin' gal walks by, or comes on to you. *Lots* of trouble.

We were in Abilene one time, me and Willie, and we picked these two gals up. They said they were sisters. So we went to this apartment. I paired off with one, he paired off with the other one. After a while, I went in the bathroom. I'm looking for some disinfectant, alcohol, mouthwash, anything. I'm going through the medicine cabinet, trying to be real quiet. Willie come in the bathroom, riled up, drunker 'n hell. His suit looked like he'd wadded it up, still had his damn tie on, hair all in his face. Pushed me out of the way, and he was standing there using the commode.

He looked at me and said, "What are you doing?" I whispered, "I'm looking for some disinfectant." He said, "Why?" I said, "I didn't have any protection in there." He said, "What are you worried about? You don't think they're fucking anybody but us, do you?"

We'd never seen 'em before in our lives.

When pete drake asked me if I'd like to do a couple of more singles sessions for Stop, I told Willie I wanted to cut "What a Way to Live," which Carl Smith had recorded earlier. Pete set up the session at Columbia. Jimmy Day was gonna be on it, and I told Jimmy that I wanted an intro that would just knock the arm off the turntable.

In the '50s, Hank Thompson had a band with three fiddles. He had a string sound with a beat. The fiddles would play a high-low unison and sometimes chords. But mainly one fiddle would play the high part, and the other two fiddles would play a low unison—the same note in a lower register.

But this was 1967. At that time no one in Nashville was using fiddles anymore. Nobody. Faron Young was not carrying a fiddle player. Neither was Tillis. Ray Price had an orchestra of violins, but no fiddles.

I said I wanted *two* fiddles. Even on Ray's honky-tonk hits, he'd only had one fiddle. We cut "What a Way to Live" with Tommy Jackson and Buddy Spicher on fiddles, Jimmy Day on steel, and Junior Huskey on bass—the same bunch I had on the *Sound a Heartache* album, except for the fiddles.

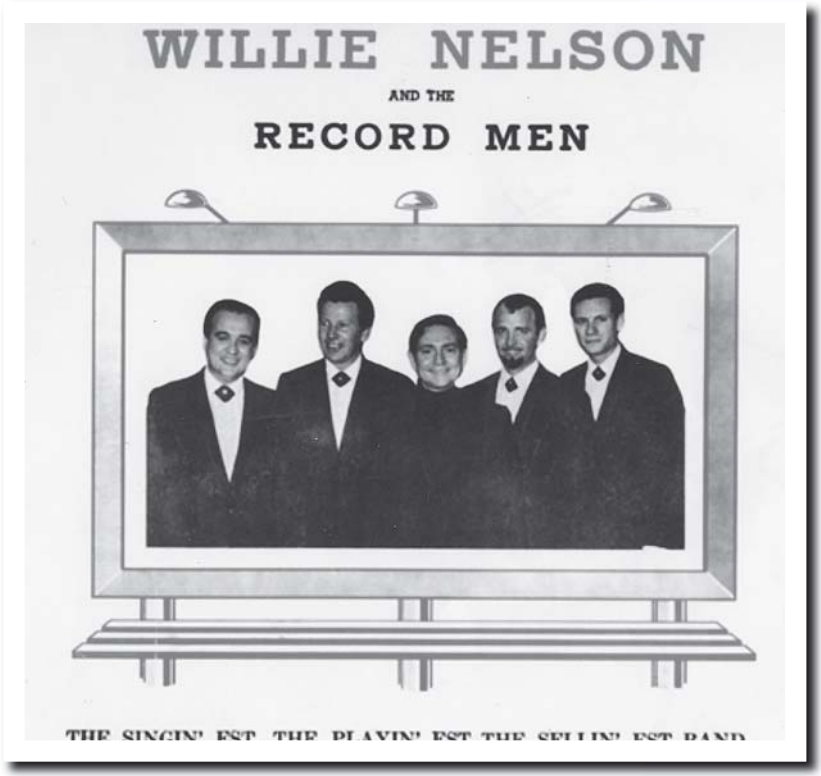
I wanted David Zettner, who was playing bass with Willie at that time, to sing harmony with me because he'd been doing it on the live shows. But he got spooked in the studio and said, "Man, I can't do it." I knew Price had been singing his own tenor on his records. We was at the same Studio B at Columbia where Price had been recording all these years. So I sang my own harmony on "What a Way to Live."

The twin fiddles kicked off the tune. Pete released it, and it took off like a scalded dog. It reached the Top 20 nationally and went to No. 1 all over Texas.

I had the shuffle beat and 4/4 bass, plus the twin-fiddle sound that goes back to Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. I had combined my two most faithful musical loves, Texas swing and Texas honky-tonk.

My solo success was helping Willie because on all of Willie's shows it said "Willie Nelson and band featuring Johnny Bush and Jimmy Day." At first, we called the band the Offenders, named after the offending odors that a breath mint was supposed to kill. The promoters weren't too crazy about the name, so we changed it to the Record Men, after Willie's hit, "Mr. Record Man."

When I started getting calls to work singles, Willie encouraged



Willie Nelson and the Record Men, New York City, Taft Hotel, 1968: left to right, *Johnny Bush, Jimmy Day, Willie Nelson, Paul English, and David Zettner.*

me to take these calls when he was off. A guy in El Paso wanted me for two nights, and it was nights that Willie was going to be off. It was in December of 1967. He wanted to pay me $250 a night.

I thought, "$250! God, this is great." But I said, "If you'll pay $350, I'll bring Jimmy Day with me. My sound is the sound of a pedal steel guitar."

Hell, I could still make $250 and pay Jimmy what he was getting with Willie. I knew if Willie was off, that meant Jimmy was off, too.

By this time, Pete Drake had bought the *Sound of a Heartache* album and officially released it on Stop. When "What a Way to Live" took off, Pete told me he wanted me to finish another album. That's when we went in to cut the *Undo the Right* album.

We cut the whole album in six hours, two sessions back to back.

If you remember, at this time Price was moving toward middle-of-the-road orchestra-pop with records like "Danny Boy" and "Spanish Eyes." He was aiming toward the Tony Bennett and Perry Como pop sound. That left the shuffle beat and that country fiddle thing wide open.

I knew the Texas market, and I knew that if you had Texas, you could work. So that's what I concentrated on. It wasn't by accident. It was what I wanted to do.

A few months later I was on tour with Willie on the West Coast. We were standing on the corner of Hollywood and Vine, just hanging around Hollywood. We picked up a *Billboard* at a newsstand, and we saw that the single "Undo the Right" was climbing. By the time the deejay convention came around in November 1968, it was No. 4. Hank Cochran, who was half writer of the tune with Willie, was elated. He said, "Man, I can really walk around town now. I got a No. 4 single."

By the end of '68, my records were getting more airplay than Willie's records. Some of his records at the time were "In My Own Peculiar Way," "Permanently Lonely," "San Antonio," and "I'm Still Not Over You." Great songs. Great, great songs. I recorded some of these myself.

But it was time for me to think about going out on my own. Willie called me into his motel room and he said, "You've been working singles, huh? How much you getting?" I said, "Sometime $100, sometimes $250."

My plan to move out front was working. The most I'd ever made as a drummer was $35 a day, when I did ten days in Texas with George Jones in 1966 when Willie was off for a couple of weeks. All of these dates were makeup dates where he had no-showed before. We had trouble in every town finding a motel that would let us check in, due to their previous experience with Jones's band, the Jones Boys. They'd trash motel rooms. I don't know why, but that was their thing. The Jones Boys consisted of three brothers: Don Adams on bass, Gary ("Dime") Adams on guitar, and Arnie Adams on drums. For some reason, Dime and Arnie had been fired, which is why I was in the band.

I hope this doesn't ruin his reputation, but George Jones was the most perfect gentleman on that tour. He made every show and couldn't have been nicer. He was kind, considerate, just the opposite of what I'd always heard. My foot pedal and ride cymbal had been stolen out of Starday Studios in Nashville right before the tour started. Jones bought the new equipment for me and let me pay him back over the ten days.

It was just a great time, you know. The music was great. It was

solid, traditional country. George Jones. Everywhere we played was packed. He even let me sing a couple of tunes before he'd come on. I can't say enough good things about him from my own personal experience, but I have to admit I was a little disappointed. I kept waiting for the other shoe to fall so that I could see what all the stories were about. It didn't fall.

Jones had offered to pay me fifty dollars a night to stay with the band. But I had turned him down because Willie had promised to do a session with me, which led to the *Sound of a Heartache* album. Now Willie was offering me a hundred dollars a date to stay with the band another year. A hundred dollars a date was big money then for a sideman.

But at the same time, he had been grooming me to go out on my own for a long time. You have to understand the kind of individual he is. Some people would have had professional jealousy: Here I am the boss, and I'm paying you, and you got the hit.

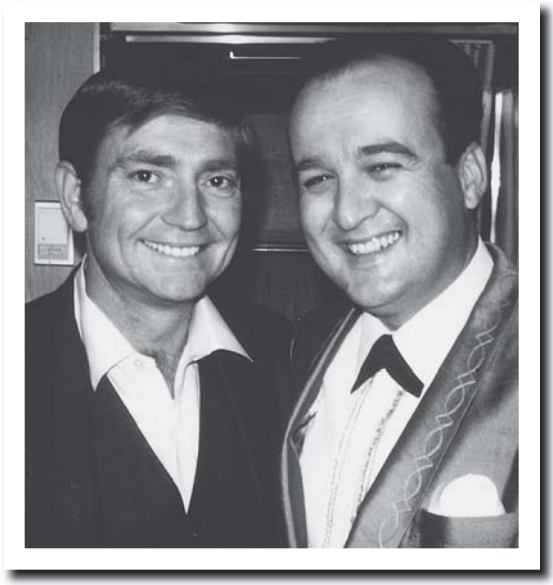
Willie wasn't jealous at all. He was glad for me. He had helped bring it about by producing my first album. He done exactly what he said he would do that day at Ridgetop when I got out of my car feeling lowdown and rejected and didn't know what I was going to do.

After he wrote that letter to the Nashville booking agency, Willie had started his own agency with Crash Stewart. Crash was a young promoter we'd all known for years. He had booked Ray Price when he was still in college, and he booked Hank Williams's last date in Texas. So he and Willie formed Alamo Promotions.

Crash was excited about my career, and when we'd be out on the road with Willie, he knew how many dates we were going to work, so when Willie was off he would set dates for me to work as a single. It was so weird. The first cities that called me to work on my own were El Paso, Chicago, and Corpus Christi. Back then these stations had their own charts, and I was their No. 1. I'd be in Chicago with Willie, and Willie's next date would be two days later in Florida, so I'd fly to El Paso to play a solo date, fly from El Paso to Corpus and play a date, then fly to Florida to catch up with Willie and the band.

I was making more money on the single dates than I was with Willie, but a deal was a deal. Also, I thought Willie and I were dynamite together. I would dance their asses off for an hour, then I'd call Willie up and have the people gather around the microphone.

It was working out good until I got to the point where I was being



Willie Nelson and Johnny Bush at Panther Hall, Ft. Worth, 1968.

offered more money to work as a single than Willie was being offered for the entire band. That's when Willie said, "It's time for you to go."

My last night with Willie Nelson was December of 1968, Panther Hall, Fort Worth, Texas. At the TV show at Panther Hall that afternoon, the band gave me a plaque that Willie had written the words to. The words had nothing to do with my departure, but he spoke with the voice of brotherhood:

> Do not be of a critical nature. How can you say what I do is wrong when you don't know what I do? How can you say what I am is wrong when you don't know what I am? How can you say what I say is wrong when you don't know what I say? Look deep within the web of your soul until you can see your true reflection. You will see that what I do you have done. What I am you have been. What I say you have said. Perhaps you have misunderstood us both.—Willie Nelson

So I look up with tears in my eyes, and here comes the pie in my face from Paul English.

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10

YOU GAVE ME A MOUNTAIN

This time, Lord, you gave me a mountain
A mountain that I may never climb
And it isn't a hill any longer
You gave me a mountain this time

—"YOU GAVE ME A MOUNTAIN," WRITTEN BY MARTY ROBBINS, RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

I WAS THIRTY-TWO when I went out on my own. Somehow, I felt like I was going to make it. The only question was when.

After I left Willie, I formed my own band, starting with fiddler Frenchie Burke. He was from Houston, and he'd been working singles with me when I was still with Willie.

Back in those days, those Texas fiddle players were treacherous; there were some bad fiddle players out there. But Frenchie and I really gelled together because he could play the new record I had out. I'd al-

ways liked fiddles. Ray Price had walked away from that fiddle shuffle-beat sound, but I felt like there was still life there. Frenchie also had that Cajun lick down, so I said, "Hey, would you like to start working some singles with me?"

The band was Frenchie Burke on fiddle. Lynn Frazier, a rowdy kid who had worked for Price, played steel. I had a drummer out of San Antonio, Joe McAllister. And I hired Bee Spears to play bass. Bee had played with Willie while David Zettner did a brief stint in the army. Bee was just nineteen or twenty—real young, but a hell of a bass player.

I bought uniforms. I had these flared Levis and these poncho vests—Mexican serape-type vests—and Apache ties. Tony Lama gave us patent-leather boots.

Jack Johnson, Charley Pride's manager, named the band. I was looking for something South Texas, with a Tex-Mex flair. We thought of the Comancheros, but didn't come up with anything I really liked. In passing, Jack Johnson said, "Now, when you and the Bandoleros get to Washington, you call me . . ."

And boom, I said, "That's it!" And at the same time, this movie came out, *Bandolero!* with James Stewart and Raquel Welch. A bandolier is a gun belt with bullets in it. And a bandito is a border bandit, who will kill you just for your shoes, like in the classic movie *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*.

So what better place for a Bandolero than in a honky-tonk?

Once I had the band lined up, I bought what I called a bus. Pete Drake sold it to me. It was the second edition of a Winnebago that they'd built, the '69 model. Motor homes back then were brand-new. You saw very few of them. They weren't as expensive as a bus, but they had a bathroom, they had a water heater and a shower, and they had conveniences that you could use in case you didn't have a chance to go to a motel. It was considered a pretty plush thing back then. But it was the biggest piece of shit I ever bought in my life.

And I made so many mistakes when I put my band together. I thought I'd have guys in my band like Willie had in his, guys that would do the right thing and take the pressure off of me. I attracted just the opposite.

Frenchie was a good fiddler, but he caused me a lot of problems. Even though we're friends today, and he was one of the best fiddle players I've ever heard, he was a problem as far as money was concerned. And the second problem I had with him was that he couldn't get along

Johnny Bush and the original Bandolero Band: in background, left to right, *Bee Spears, Lynn Frazier, Lee Harmon, Frenchie Burke (not pictured, Joe McAllister). Brackettville, Texas, 1969.*

with the younger musicians. He had spent a lot of years in the air force, and he had that military air about him. I had kids in the band, and this is when people started letting their hair grow, at the beginning of the hippie movement. He despised that.

Here I was worrying about satisfying these promoters because I needed the money, and there's dissension in the band. See, I'd always been a sideman. Now all of a sudden I've crossed over, and I'm on the other side of the fence, and this is new territory for me. I'm management instead of labor.

The tension between older guys like Frenchie and kids like Lynn and Bee was a reflection of the bigger picture at the time. The hippie and the redneck were still at war. They had a total resentment of one another. The longhair would call the cowboys rednecks, and the redneck cowboys would call the kids hippies if their hair was just a little bit long, you know.

When Willie started letting his hair grow, I thought he'd lost his mind. Here I was trying to appeal to the traditional country audience, with my band in uniforms, and Willie had gone over to the other side. The long hair didn't bother me personally. What bothered me was the

flak I was getting from it: "Who's that hippie you got in your band? We don't like long hair up here; we're cow people!" "Get that hippie off the stage!"

I think it had a lot to do with Vietnam. People didn't want to go. Hell, I didn't want them to go. I thought that war was strictly political, and it was a no-win situation. They didn't want that war to end. They didn't want our boys even fighting back. They were sent over there to die. For what?

I had the band on salary, $150 a week each, because I remembered how hard it was for me to make it with a wife and kids, and pay child support and rent and car payments and insurance, and trying to live like a human being.

At the same time, I had solo contracts for like $300–350 that I had to honor that had been booked months in advance before I put the band together. No matter how glorious it may sound to say we play for the fun of it, we still have to pay the light bill and buy groceries. You still have to go to the doctor and take care of your children.

All of a sudden, I had twenty-five or thirty people I was responsible for, including the band members and their families. Panic time. What do you do? The old what-ifs come on: What if I get sick? What if this job cancels? I felt all this responsibility on top of me. Plus, I was getting pressure from promoters about my band.

I began to hyperventilate. Back then I didn't know what "hyperventilate" meant. The medical definition is if you overbreathe, you exhale too much carbon dioxide out of your lungs, and all of a sudden you can't catch your breath. And the more you breathe, the worse it gets. The shortness of breath can mimic the onslaught of a heart attack.

After so many years of struggling to get somewhere with my career, I had a fear of it all going away. Perhaps every entertainer experiences that because you try so hard, and you've waited so long, and you can see that door opening . . . But there were several people trying to keep it shut, and some of them were people in my own camp. They weren't doing it on purpose, but they were holding me back.

At the same time, I was getting better and better as a singer. I don't mind admitting that I leaned towards the Price style: the high note, the vibrato, and trying to get as much emotion into the song as he did. He was my mentor. I didn't feel guilty about doing it because by then he had gone over to the pop side of the road and the country audience was looking for somebody to keep the flame burning for the old Cherokee Cowboy sound, especially in Texas.

Besides that, when Price first started, he had his own mentor: Hank Williams. It's very obvious he tried to sound like Hank. He phrased like him. He broke his voice the way Hank did. In certain pictures he even tried to stand like him. You know, that kind of a slouch. Hank was his hero. Going back farther, Hank's hero was Roy Acuff. There's nothing wrong with following in someone's footsteps as long as you don't try to copy them forever. Eventually, you need to develop a style of your own.

Mel Tillis got on my ass one night. He said, "You've already proven you can sing, now lower your fuckin' keys." And I thought, "If he could sing as high as me, he would."

The reason I was singing high was that we had bad PA sets. There was no good PA sets in those days. There was no such thing as a monitor, which would let the singer hear himself onstage. If you're playing in a place that has a thousand people in it, the guys on the bandstand had to turn up to be heard, so the only way I knew I was singing was to feel the vibration in my throat. I didn't even know if I was on key or not.

To sing louder, you have to raise your pitch. Singing is controlled yelling. You can't project from a low register. Nobody will hear you. So the louder I had to become, the higher I had to sing to be heard.

Johnny Bush and the Bandolero Band performing at the Golden Stallion in San Antonio, 1969: left to right, *Ernie Reed (fiddle), Bill Bowers (bass), Frenchie Burke (fiddle), Johnny Bush (guitar and vocals), Dicky Overbey (steel guitar), Randy Reinhardt, piano (not pictured, Mike Watson [drums]).*

And performing live was what was paying the bills. For all the airplay my records were getting, I didn't get any royalties for record sales. I never have received one penny from any of the recordings I've done for any record label.

In 1969, Pete Drake called me to come to Nashville to record another album. We were staying in the old Savoy Hotel. It was a skid-row flophouse compared to the other hotels, but damn, I had a band to house. I had commissions to pay.

As I mentioned earlier, I think one of the reasons I hated Nashville so bad is that you can't live in Texas all your life and then move to that smoky, cold, damp, stinking town, you know? It was like being on another planet to me. I couldn't go out and jam anywhere. Couldn't go to a club or a cabaret. There was nothing happening. Plus, I felt like I was trapped when I was in Nashville, away from my daughter in San Antonio.

But I had to go there to record.

I was going to do a week with the band at the Black Poodle in Nashville's Printer's Alley. The Black Poodle wasn't paying that much, but I knew I had to play jobs like that to keep everything together. Frenchie still couldn't get along with Bee, and Lynn Frazier was causing all kinds of problems for me by mouthing off to the wrong people. I told him, "The first guy that strikes a blow, whether he's right or wrong, he's fired." I said, "Goddamn it, we're out here trying to make a living!"

The pressure was really getting to me. I had a big recording session coming up, and I couldn't get enough breath. I tried whiskey. That didn't help. Made me feel better, but it didn't make me breathe any better.

I went back to the room and told Pete, "I'm not feeling good." He sent me to his doctor, and the doctor done an EKG on me. First one I'd ever had. I told myself, "Self, this son of a bitch thinks I'm having a heart attack. I'm not having a heart attack; I just can't breathe." I didn't know the connection.

The doctor said, "Have you been under any stress lately?" I said no. (Who the fuck was I trying to kid?) He said, "I want you to take these little green and black pills. You're under stress and you're hyperventilating. But don't drink with them."

What he gave me was Librium, the forerunner to Valium.

Here I am fronting a five-piece crazy-ass country band, with a hippie bass player and an incorrigible steel-guitar player in the band causing all this shit. I'm far from home. I'm doing six sets a night at the Poodle, but I'm not supposed to drink?

Hank Cochran came to see me every day, pitching me songs. And he was drinking every day. I said, "Hank, I cannot drink with you. The doctor give me these pills."

He said, "Fuck the doctor, fuck them pills, fuck him, and fuck you." Have I mentioned that Hank was a very empathetic person?

After about twenty-four hours I began to settle down and breathe normal again. Man, I was feeling great. The session was coming up!

Pete had started looking for songs for me, and he'd found one in particular. He said, "Frankie Laine has this pop record, and I want you to hear it." And he gave me a 45 rpm single of Frankie Laine's version of "You Gave Me a Mountain."

I went back to the motel with my little record player; there was no cassette tape machines then. But I didn't get around to playing it right away.

In those days, like there are now, there were distinct lines drawn between the music: country and western, rock and roll, and pop. Frankie Laine had had a pop hit with "You Gave Me A Mountain," but Marty Robbins had written it. You heard of country crossing over to pop, but you never heard of pop crossing over to country. (Elvis also recorded "You Gave Me a Mountain," but that was much later.)

I was happy to have a chance to record a song of Marty's. Marty had always been one of my all-time favorites. Back in 1956, rock and roll had really taken over, and country was taking a beating. Ray Price had "Crazy Arms," and Bobby Helms had "Fraulein," and Marty Robbins had "Singing the Blues"—the only three songs that I can think of that were keeping country music alive.

I decided to drop in on Ralph Emery at [radio station] WSM, and guess who was in the studio with him? Marty Robbins, playing the piano and singing, as he often did.

I'd been on shows with him, but I'd never met him until that night at Ralph's. He would always close the show after our set was done. He was 100 percent business. He had quit drinking, and was kind of a loner, and he couldn't sleep. So he'd often spend the night hanging out with Ralph on the air.

I have to admit I'd heard all the stories about Ralph Emery being rude and intimidating to a new artist. I thought, "Well, if he and Marty Robbins are big buddies, he can't be that bad of a guy."

Ralph Emery was the number one disc jockey in the world as far as country music. He was to country what Dick Clark was to rock and roll. He wasn't that crazy about country music, but he just fell into the job.

Every time I was in Nashville he was not only doing his afternoon TV show on WSM Channel 5, but he was on WSM radio every night from midnight until five or six in the morning. Everybody at night would listen. At that time, you could get WSM everywhere. Even when I was with Ray Price and going from Nashville to San Antone to see my daughter, I would listen to Ralph.

It was the first time I had heard a country disc jockey with a credible, meaningful, intelligent voice. With all due respect to my old friend Charlie Walker, who is still my friend and who helped me get started as a songwriter, it wasn't, "This is ol' poke-salad-eatin' Charlie Walker, comin' at you right here from KMAC . . . Whoo-woo-eee-eee!" That worked for Charlie, but that page had turned.

Ralph had this announcer's voice, you know? He was a class act. He was adding dignity to what had been undignified. Here was this deep, resonant radio-announcer voice playing country music. And it was just knocking me out.

I think up until that time, country music was viewed by the masses as blue-collar music, the have-nots' music. It was the white man's blues. I wished I'd coined that phrase; country music *is* a white man's blues.

But I could hear the records getting better, and deejays like Ralph Emery were adding class, and I wanted to be a part of that. When *Hee Haw* first came on in 1969, I said they were destroying the dignity we've been trying to build for the last five years. I told my agent never to book me on that show. It was a spoof, but it was very successful. I played on the show twice.

Anyway, Marty is over at Ralph's studio at WSM, and he's on piano and singing. Ralph said, "What are you doing in town, John?" And I said, "I'm here to record." Ralph asked me what I was going to record, and I said, "One of his songs," meaning Marty's.

Marty says, "Which one?" And I said, "'You Gave Me a Mountain.'" I told him Pete Drake had found it for me and I hadn't heard the song yet. He said, "Well, let me sing it for you."

This is live on a 50,000-watt clear-channel station, and Marty Robbins sings "You Gave Me a Mountain" for me, for the first time!

Ralph had this big desk in the studio, about five or six chairs, and when all of the people would come to visit and spend the night with him, he'd have you read copy. There was little cards back then. It was all done live. He'd say, "Read this," and he'd just throw it at you. Some-

times you'd look it over real quick so you wouldn't mess it up, but he didn't care whether you messed up or not, evidently. I don't know what his sponsors thought. Some of them boys he'd have up there could not read copy cold.

You remember me telling you that I had had some training in reading radio copy back in San Antonio? Ralph thought I was something else, you know? After the show that night, he said, "I've been cutting fifteen-minute segments for syndication in different markets. I want you and Marty to do some station promos for me." He had about ten or twelve radio stations, some of them Texas stations that I knew real well.

So there's me and Marty Robbins, cutting radio spots with Ralph Emery, and I'm standing by one of my all-time heroes, being buddy-buddy. I thought that was so cool. What a thrill, you know? The kid from Kashmere Gardens standing there next to Marty Robbins. Are you kidding me?

We recorded the *You Gave Me a Mountain* album at Music City Studios. Once again, we did the whole album in six hours, two sessions back to back, no overdubs. Weldon Myrick played steel because Jimmy was inside the bottle and Buddy was in Vegas, playing bass with Roger Miller, or he'd'a been there. Tommy Jackson and Buddy Spicher on fiddles, Junior Huskey on upright bass, Jerry Shook on bass guitar, D. J. Fontana on drums. Scotty Moore, who'd been Elvis's guitar player, owned the studio and was the engineer on the session.

Today, they take weeks or months to cut an album. Can you believe that shit? Compare what they do today to what we done, and tell me what they're doing is any better. It's a rip-off somewhere as far as I'm concerned.

Although I caught some flak for it—some people accused me of trying to follow Price's move toward the middle of the road—I knew we had a hit with "You Gave Me a Mountain." It was a pop tune, not a three-chord country tune, but it wasn't hard for me to sing. It was pretty simple, really. I'd done "Unchained Melody" before that. It was just a matter of getting the country people to listen to it.

The song went to number two on the country chart, the biggest hit I ever had. I was disappointed it didn't go all the way to the top. We had spent money with ads and promotion, but I guess we didn't use

enough grease on the right palm. Make no mistakes, those number ones are bought.

I had several more hit singles on Stop—"My Cup Runneth Over," "Jim, Jack & Rose," "I'll Go to a Stranger," "I'll Be There." None was bigger than "You Gave Me a Mountain," but "My Cup Runneth Over" was a big record for me. I got an ASCAP record of the year award for that in 1970. It was one of most-played singles of the year on country radio.

Usually, you'd have two or three singles a year, depending on how much play you were getting. They didn't want to put a new one out while you were still gaining momentum with the previous one. Sometimes I'd have singles where both sides were hits. "Jim, Jack & Rose" was not the A-side; "I'll Go to a Stranger" was the A-side, but the deejays turned it over. The record company hates that. They call that a "split record." That's why they started putting the same song on both sides.

I picked all the tunes I recorded on Stop, with Pete Drake and Tommy Hill. Pete was always looking for that crossover hit. I guess all producers are looking for that. I never worried about it. What I look for in a song—and I guess I learned this from watching Ray Price pick material—is that it wakes up something in your mind the first time you hear it and makes you want to hear all of it. We call it the hook, the grabber, the punch line. Somehow, in your conscious or subconscious mind, you can relate to it. And you say to yourself, "Yeah, *yeah* . . ."

When I look back now, I can see how the songs I sang mirrored what was going on my personal life. But at the time, I didn't really look at it that way. I thought of myself as an actor trying to convey the songwriter's message with the emotion and the phrasing of my voice.

But like an actor needs a script, a singer needs the song. You have to think, "I like this story so much I want to tell this to somebody. I want them to feel what I felt when I heard it."

I never cut what I felt was a shit song for Stop. I was glad Pete had the suggestions he did. Pete had the knack of picking good songs. I never would have heard "You Gave Me a Mountain" 'cause I didn't listen to that kind of radio. "My Cup Runneth Over," that was the Ames Brothers.

You can make more money if you write your own hits, but it has to be a hit. Of all my hit singles for Stop in the late sixties, the only one I wrote was "Sound of a Heartache." If there's a better song lying on the

table than mine, I'll record it. I'm not prejudiced in favor of my own material; in fact, I'm probably harder on my own material. I don't record a song just because I wrote it.

Remember, back in those days a deejay could play what he wanted to play. You could get out of your car, go in the radio station, talk with the deejay. He'd put your record on and play it. The deejays started loving my stuff. That's what helped me.

My records were played all over the country, in New Jersey, in Philadelphia, Chicago, Des Moines, New Orleans. But my focus for performing was always the Texas market. I could have played Chicago, but I could make more money by going to Houston than I could by taking a band all the way to Chicago. Nashville acts could do that because it's a shorter trip to Chicago or New Jersey from Nashville than it is from Texas, and I was not going to move back to Nashville.

In 1969, Mary Lou and I built the house on the northwest side of San Antonio where I still live. Smartest thing I ever did, otherwise it would all be gone now. Her daddy, Julius Amand, sold me the land for what he'd paid for it back in the forties. So in reality, he virtually gave it to me. And he remained my friend until the day he died.

With my growing popularity, I needed a secretary, someone to answer fan mail, do weekly reports, and keep the books. I couldn't ask Mary Lou to do it; she had to take care of her daughter and everything else when I was gone for months at a time.

I had met a couple in San Antonio named the Cottons, who started coming to my dances. I hired Charlsie Cotton, who had some secretarial experience. Well, it was another case of alcohol and raging desire. Charlsie started going out on the road with me periodically. She was married; so was I. There's a lot to be said for that old saying, "Don't dip your pen in the company ink."

Her husband, Bill Cotton, worked for the IRS. See how smart I am?

In case you haven't figured it out yet, I was addicted to sex. It took me a long time to understand that. I think it stemmed from way, way back, when I was having sex at an early age. I don't know if I was trying to grow up too fast because my world ended when I was twelve, when my parents got divorced. This little island of security dissipated before my very eyes. I'm not blaming Mama and I'm not blaming Daddy. I

don't know if sex was a form of reaching out for acceptance, but I never thought about it in terms of being addictive until I joined the church. And when my preacher said "sex addict," it hit me right between the eyes. Everything started falling into place.

I think Mary Lou suspected something was going on all along, but she really didn't know. When you are traveling with some chick on the bus, it don't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together, but Mary Lou is pretty naive. She sees the good in everybody.

But Mary Lou didn't see the importance of Charlsie going on the road with me. Neither did Charlsie's husband. There really was no point to it, other than the fact that she wanted to be with me.

Bill Cotton confronted me a couple of times and said, "I think Charlsie needs to stay at home." I agreed; she was his wife. What I didn't know is that Charlsie called the shots, not him. He told her to stay home, and she left him. I think that's what signaled to Mary Lou that this was definitely more than an employee-employer relationship.

I'VE TOLD YOU what I saw in women. They were like a drug to me. But, you may wonder, what did they see in me?

Being the lead singer in a band has a charismatic effect on some women. One of the first toys a little girl is given is a baby doll. They are taught almost from birth to be mothers. They carry that over when they see some poor wretched character that needs to be mothered and nurtured. They see a guy at the microphone singing words in a song that they like to hear. Some guys never say, "I love you." They don't say the three words to their woman that she wants to hear.

So they see this Hank Williams–looking character at the microphone. He's skin and bones, and he looks like death eating a cracker, and he hasn't had a decent meal in months. And he's singing songs like "I Love You Because" or "Lost Highway." And those women want to put their arms around him and mother him. They feel like he's saying those words to them.

And, actually, he is. I used to do a Carl Smith hit in my show, "Sing Her a Pretty Love Song." I would introduce the song by saying: "All you women, get your husbands or your boyfriends. I want you to dance to this song. All you women know your guys find it hard to say pretty things to you, things you want to hear. So at this point, you guys take her by the hand . . ." (I know this sounds corny, but it worked.)

". . . and bring her out here on the dance floor and let me tell you women what he would like to say. Let me say it for him."

> The words of a love song, just like a love letter
> Will send your heart's message along
> And if you can't say how you feel when you hold her
> Then sing her a pretty love song
> Sing her a love song, and tell her you love her
> Don't keep her waiting too long
> And if you can't say how you feel when you hold her
> Sing her a pretty love song.

If the guys didn't get laid after that, they were with the wrong woman.

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WHISKEY RIVER

Whiskey River, take my mind
Don't let her memory torture me
Whiskey River, don't run dry
You're all I've got, take care of me

—"WHISKEY RIVER," WRITTEN AND RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

AFTER A WHILE, my band problems straightened themselves out: Frenchie left; Lynn Frazier got drafted; at Willie's suggestion, I fired Bee. Of course, Willie immediately hired him, and Bee's still with Willie today. But I got a good bunch of guys in their place, and the momentum started building.

By 1970 or '71, I was looking for a major label. People would hear one of my records on the radio, and then they'd go to a store looking to buy it, and they couldn't find the damn product.

Stop, like all independents, was having trouble staying alive. There were pressing bills. You send a distributor a thousand records, and if thirty days later he doesn't pay, how do you collect? And if the

independent goes belly-up, you don't get paid. Whereas if a distributor doesn't pay a major, they might not get the new Charley Pride record, which they've got to have.

It's called leverage. An independent doesn't have that.

I did four albums for Stop Records: *Sound of A Heartache*, *Undo the Right*, *You Gave Me A Mountain*, *Bush Country*. That would have been the last one from Stop, but some of the tracks were later repackaged and released on other labels under other titles.

To his credit, Pete Drake didn't want to hold me back. He said, "If you can get a major, go for it." His only stipulation was that I pay off the note on the Winnebago I'd bought from him when I started the band.

In the summer of 1971, I was playing at Gruene Hall in New Braunfels, the oldest still-in-business dance hall in Texas, when my manager Crash Stewart said, "Well, we found a major."

I said, "Great, which one?" He told me RCA, and I said, "You're kidding—that's the biggest label in the world! How'd you pull it off?"

And he said, "Charley Pride and Jack Johnson. Remember that time at Panther Hall when you insisted Charley sing, against everybody's wishes?" I didn't think I'd done anything important, because I was not in a position to be heard. But I saw a chance to expose Charley, you know?

Crash continued, "They went to Jerry Bradley and got us a deal at RCA."

Unbelievable. That little favor I'd done for Charley Pride stayed with him. Charley and Jack both went to bat for me at RCA and got me on. What's that saying? "What goes around, comes around."

RCA not only had Charley Pride, they had Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner. They had Waylon Jennings and Eddy Arnold. And of course they had Elvis. He was signed to their pop division and recording in Nashville.

I was low man on the totem pole. The big man at Stop was the little man at RCA.

Actually, it could have been a bad move for me. As I said earlier, a record label has no identity of its own. But RCA was the biggest company in the world, and they could get the product out there, whereas Stop couldn't. That's exactly why Elvis went from Sun Records to RCA.

The only holdup was that I still owed Pete about $5,000 for the Winnebago. I didn't have that kind of money. I started calling everyone I knew.

A couple of years before this, when I was playing the Nugget in Vegas, I had loaned an old rodeo cowboy friend of mine named Paul Stroud fifty bucks to get his windshield fixed. He'd come up to me afterward in Bandera, Texas, and tried to pay me back. I told him, "Aw, just buy me a steak sometime."

Well, Paul Stroud heard I needed money to sign with a major label. He walked in to the Big Star Club in Alta Loma, Texas, where I was playing that night, and handed me $5,000 in cash in a paper sack. When I asked him how he wanted me to pay him back, he said, "Aw, just buy me a steak sometime." (Later, after I sold the Winnebago, I did pay him back in full.)

With that problem solved, Crash said we needed to go to Nashville to the annual deejay's convention so I could meet Jerry Bradley, who was going to be my producer. Jerry Bradley's father, Owen Bradley, was the great producer who had worked with Patsy Cline, Ernest Tubb, Conway Twitty, Loretta Lynn—everybody on Decca. Jerry's uncle, Harold Bradley, was a highly respected studio guitarist.

Deejays from all over the country would come to Nashville every autumn for this convention. It was a chance for the record people and

Signing with RCA: Bush, seated*, with RCA's Jerry Bradley,* left*, and manager Crash Stewart,* right*. Nashville, 1971.*

the artists to meet with the deejays, and it was a great big party week. Getting drunk, getting acquainted, you know?

When we met, Jerry Bradley told me, "I've been a fan of yours for a long time. I'm glad to have you on RCA." And I said, "Well, I'm mighty pleased to be here with the biggest record label in the world. I'm really honored."

He said, "Okay, the first order of business is, I want you to write me a hit." Say what? All the songwriters they had in Nashville, and he wanted me to write the first hit? Shit, I thought my track record with Stop was sufficient to get me signed, and the only one of them songs I had written was "Sound of a Heartache." What the hell was this?

I started thinking that maybe this wasn't going to work. I had a lot of dates booked. I was having major problems at home. And I'm thinking of all these good writers: "There's ten thousand songs out there that we could be listening to, and he wants me to write one of my own?" But he put the ball in my court, just like that. Son of a bitch.

AFTER THE CONVENTION I had a date in Texarkana on the way back to San Antone. I had been giving a lot of thought to writing this song for Jerry Bradley. In Texarkana, I woke up with this one line in my head. The only thing I could find to write on was a paper sack that somebody had brought me a cheeseburger in:

Bathing my memoried mind in the wetness of its soul

Pretty good line. I thought it sounded like a Willie Nelson song.

I got to kicking it around on the bus, and by the time I got back to San Antonio, I had "Whiskey River" pretty well written:

I'm drowning in a whiskey river
Bathing my memoried mind in the wetness of its soul
Feeling the amber current flow her from my mind
And warm my empty heart she left so cold

Whiskey River, take my mind
Don't let her memory torture me
Whiskey River, let me hide
You're all I've got, take care of me

That's it, just one verse and a chorus. I didn't like the line "let me hide," but I left it in there.

After I wrote it, I called Willie on the phone. He was living in Bandera, Texas, after his farmhouse in Ridgetop burned down and his marriage to Shirley fell apart.

Crash had found him an off-season dude ranch with a nine-hole golf course in Bandera called Lost Valley Ranch. Big clubhouse, Olympic-size pool. But it was in the wintertime, and nothing was really open except the golf course. So Willie and his band and the bunch he now calls the Family moved in.

Look at what Willie has today outside of Austin—a golf course, a clubhouse converted into a recording studio, a bunch of condos, a western movie-set town, Olympic-size pool . . . He created almost the same thing for himself that he had when he was on his ass and living in Bandera. He must have really liked that place.

Anyway, I caught up with Willie at that dude ranch in Bandera. Told him I had signed with RCA and had this song and wanted to sing it to him over the phone. I thought maybe he could help me come up with another verse.

When I finished, he said, "I think it's a hit." I said, "Don't you think it needs another verse?" He said, "No, I don't think so. You've more or less said what you need to say. Just turn it around and sing it again."

The band and I got to rehearsing it and kicking it around. In December of '71, I got to the Esquire Club in Houston, and I said, "Let's try it out on the crowd for the first time."

In its day, the Esquire Club presented most of the top country acts to come through Houston. I played the grand opening of the place in 1957, backing Ted Daffan with the Texas Plainsmen, and played there with Willie, Ray Price, and my band many times on Wednesday nights.

During the setup, we ran through the song. I still didn't like singing "let me hide," but everyone else was happy with the line. I left the bandstand, and while I was back on the bus, the lightbulb came on: "Whiskey River, *don't run DRY*."

I got chill bumps on both arms, so I knew that was the line. And when we tried it out that night, people liked it.

It came time to record. In February of 1972, a session was set up at RCA Studio A to do two sessions back-to-back. Something blew out in Studio A, so we had to move to Studio B, where I had recorded *Sound of a Heartache* years before. We ran out of time to finish the al-

bum, but we had several strong tracks in the can, including "Whiskey River."

Jerry Bradley was happy. I was happy. I headed back to Texas from Nashville, and he left a message in San Antonio for me to call him. So after I got home, I called him back.

He said, "It's your call. What do you want to release first?" I'm thinking, "He keeps putting the ball in my court, and he's the producer."

I was confused. This was the first time I had ever had a "producer." The word was new to me; Pete Drake functioned more as an A&R guy. I thought about a "producer," and I thought it meant what the word implied.

He said, "You call the shot. Win, lose, or draw."

I had told him a thousand times that my focus was on the Texas market because that's where I made my living. And I said, "Let's go with 'Whiskey River.'"

He did, and it was the biggest thing I ever had. I don't know if it was the timing. I don't know if it was the song. I don't know if it was the production or the label. Possibly the combination of everything, I don't know. But the damn thing was a monster. It's the song that's kept

Johnny Bush (in hairpiece). RCA publicity still, 1971.

me working for the past thirty years, the song I still get requests for every night, and it still gets me booked today.

The release of "Whiskey River" was held up for several months because my final single on Stop, "I'll Be There," was doing so well. The "Whiskey River" single was released in June of '72. I called home from California a few weeks later, and Mary Lou said, "You got a No. 1 song here in San Antone!" I said, "Really?"

Here's the weird thing about the charts. I had a No. 1 hit in Texas, but "Whiskey River," the biggest record I ever had, stalled out at No. 14 nationally. But it was No. 1 on a lot of stations all across the South. Hell, between my Stop and RCA singles, I'll bet I've had ten regional No. ones.

Willie cut "Whiskey River" for the first time a year or two after I did, on the *Shotgun Willie* album he did for Atlantic in New York with producer Jerry Wexler. His version of "Whiskey River" was totally different from mine—my version is a shuffle, and his had a syncopated kind of rock tempo. He even starts out with the bridge and ended it on the verse. But I was proud that he cut it.

"Whiskey River" became the song Willie begins every one of his shows with, to this day. I want to say he's recorded it about twenty times, including live albums and compilations. The royalties from these recordings have helped me through some lean times. Twice a year I get mechanical royalties for sales from the publishing company, and every ninety days I get airplay royalties from BMI. For years, that was like $2,500 every ninety days, sometimes, as much as $6,000. I'm not getting the airplay now that I was, but I am making more on mechanicals because it's selling.

In 2002 alone I had five cuts on "Whiskey River": Willie Nelson's Sony boxed set; Trick Pony, with Willie, on Warner Bros.; Willie Nelson's *Stars & Guitars*, with Sheryl Crow; Cross Canadian Ragweed, an alternative country-rock group that's almost as hot as Pat Green is now; and a Texas country artist, Tommy Alverson. The Country Music Television channel recently ran a poll on the top country drinking songs of all time. "Whiskey River" came in at No. 4.

Every song I ever wrote, I've compared it to Willie's "Funny How Time Slips Away." I've never gotten there, though I'm still trying. "Opportunity to Cry," "Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground"—Willie's songs have set a standard for songwriting that will endure. How ironic

that the greatest country songwriter who's ever lived should pick my song for his theme song.

As I mentioned before, I thought Willie had lost his mind when he moved to Bandera, and then to Austin, and grew his hair long. But he ushered in a whole new era in country music.

I couldn't fathom that the country people who came to my dances would want to go out in a pasture and sit in 102-degree temperatures and gaze up at a bandstand for twelve to fourteen hours, like they did at his Fourth of July picnics. I thought that hippies stoned out of their minds will do that, but a true country music lover will not go sit on the ground in a cow pasture for fourteen hours in the sun.

I was wrong. What I was seeing was a fusion of the hippie and the cowboy or the redneck. First they're passing beers back and forth, and then joints. First thing you know, hippies are wearing cowboy hats. Cowboys are letting their hair grow and wearing turquoise. It got to the point where you couldn't distinguish them anymore. And thus was born what they called "redneck rock."

Willie saw this movement coming. He met Jerry Wexler, the Atlantic producer who had worked with Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, and numerous jazz artists, at a party in Nashville. He sang "Phases and Stages" at the party, and Jerry Wexler said, "I been looking for you."

Willie already had written the whole *Phases and Stages* album at the Holiday Inn in Nashville in one night. One side portrays the female point of view, and the other side the male point of view. That alone, to me, makes it a great album. It wasn't a hit, though it outsold his other albums up to that point.

What Willie was doing was redefining the independence that Texas country musicians have always had, beginning with Bob Wills and Milton Brown. Nashville had the industry, but Texas had the talent and the soul.

In early spring of '72, I was playing in El Paso when I got this call from my attorney. He said, "Mary Lou is in the hospital, and they don't think she's going to make it."

She'd OD'd on tranquilizers. I was devastated. Guilt came down on me so hard. If Mary Lou had died, I thought I would have been the direct cause of it. What made me feel even worse was that we'd had a fight over the phone about something trivial the night before.

Charlsie was with me on that trip. She'd split up with her hus-

band because of me. But I was still living with Mary Lou. It was like having my cake and eating it, too.

Charlsie started crying. She was really upset. I told her, "When we get back, we gotta call this off. We can't continue this until I can straighten this out. This is serious."

We drove straight back to San Antonio from El Paso. There were no cell phones back then. I had no way to know if Mary Lou was going to live or die. I went to see her in the hospital when we got back, and she was better. That is, she was better physically, not emotionally. I told her that if it would make her happy, I would let Charlsie go as my secretary.

I lied.

So while I was back home trying to get things straight, trying to keep Mary Lou alive and do right, Charlsie did it! Just days after Mary Lou, she OD'd on tranquilizers! It wasn't an accident. Now Charlsie was in the hospital and they were telling me that *she* might not make it.

Mary Lou showed compassion for Charlsie at that time, which made me believe that Mary Lou probably was a better person than either Charlsie or I was. I'd felt guilt for much of my life, but this was beyond anything I'd experienced before. It was traumatic. I felt like this time, God really had given me a mountain.

And then they both did it again—attempted suicide. They were trying to make me choose between them. That's when I sought neutral ground. I moved out and got my own apartment.

In April 1972, I was playing Jinx's Jungle Inn in Weslaco, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley. I went out to do the show, and I felt a tightness in my throat. I didn't have that freedom on the vibrato that I was used to. I couldn't understand it. Tried singing another song: it was like my vocal cords were just choking off. Tried to sing "Danny Boy" and choked up. I got so exasperated that I went outside and just chucked my guitar into the air.

I fell down to my knees. I didn't cry, but I would have if I thought it would have helped. It was not only that I had just done a bad show. It was everything: the suicide attempts, the guilt. Silently, I prayed. I was convinced that it was God's wrath coming down on me. I was being punished for my behavior.

I'd begun having problems with my voice right after the recording of the "Whiskey River" single. I'd gone out and bought a vaporizer,

thinking it would help my dry throat so I could sing. Here I had what I knew was a hit record in the can, dates coming in, and I couldn't sing. When I really should have been at my best, I was at my worst.

This only convinced me more that I was being punished by God.

By the summer of 1972, "Whiskey River" was the No. 1 single all across Texas and was climbing the charts nationally. I still had to go back to Nashville to finish the *Whiskey River* album. We recorded five more sides: "There Stands the Glass," "Pour the Wine," "Woman (Sensuous Woman)," "This Has Got to Last," and "It's the Last Time I'll Ever Cheat on You."

Can you believe that last title? It would make for a better story to say it was intentional, but it wasn't. Ronnie Mac, a great piano player and songwriter who'd worked for Mel Tillis and everybody around Fort Worth, had pitched me the song one night on my bus at the Stagecoach in Fort Worth. That same night, the club owner, Ray Chaney, had invited me to breakfast after the gig. I said no because I needed to fly to Nashville the next day to work on the album.

Ray Chaney was killed in an auto accident on the way to breakfast. It seemed like tragedy was all around me.

When we finished the session, Jerry Bradley called me to come back to the studio to overdub the vocals. He said that Bill Bailey, one of the biggest deejays in Texas at KIKK in Houston and who was also writing the liner notes for the album, could hear a problem in my voice on the tracks we'd cut, and so we needed to redo the vocals.

He said, "Don't feel bad about it. We have to overdub Dottie West when she has vocal problems."

But *I* had never had to overdub before. Imagine how I felt. I didn't know what was wrong at the time. I felt isolated and alone.

Lots of singers in Nashville have had vocal nodules or polyps, which is caused from vocal abuse. If I sat here and rubbed my finger long enough, a blister will form. If I keep doing it, after the blister goes away, a callus will form. It's nature's way of protecting the area.

That same thing happens to the vocal cords; these little calluses form in there. In those days, they would go in and peel them off. But if they peeled a micromillimeter too much, you couldn't sing like you did any more. You might have a breathy or a hoarse voice the rest of your life. They had to be very, very careful.

I started having my larynx checked every ninety days because I sing high and I sing loud. I never had any vocal training, so I didn't know if I was abusing my vocal cords or not. I went to see an ENT doc-

tor—ear, nose, and throat. He looked at me and said, "There's no polyps; your vocal cords look fine."

I said, "Then why am I getting this choking? When I try to sing, my vibrato is gone, and after a few numbers I get hoarse."

They sent me out to the University of Texas Health Science Center hospital in San Antonio. It's a teaching hospital, and that's where I met Dr. George Gates, who was a teaching professor there. They didn't have the sophisticated equipment they do today, with the fiber-optic cameras and all. The first time I had my larynx examined, they had to knock me out. It was day surgery.

When Dr. Gates couldn't find anything physically wrong with my voice, he suggested that the problem was psychosomatic, which means it's all in your head. He suggested speech therapy, which really pissed me off, because I'd been talking all my life. How was speech therapy going to help me?

But I wasn't too hardheaded not to try. I tried it for a long time, and I couldn't see how it was helping. I did notice that the vowels were hard to pronounce. Letters like *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, those strike the vocal chords first.

They would give you phrases like "Ike Eisenhower enjoys eating in the islands."

"Practice that," they would say. Then they'd say, "Raise your pitch, raise your pitch. Instead of talking here, talk up here."

AT FIRST THE TIGHTNESS happened only when I sang, not when I tried to talk. Over the course of several months, it worked its way down. It began to affect my speaking voice.

The panic attacks got really bad too, to the point where I lost my appetite. I couldn't sing. I was afraid to leave the house, almost like agoraphobia.

I stayed hooked on Valium for about two years. Without the Valium, if I went outside and a big white cloud would come over, I'd get spooked. I knew I was having withdrawals. It's a bad drug when abused.

I also started seeing a psychiatrist. Mary Lou was seeing him too. He thought that maybe the problem in my throat was being caused by the problems in my marriage and my personal life.

Well, hell, I thought the same thing. So why couldn't I stop doing it? I'd ask him a question about why I had this desire for other women when I loved my wife, and he'd ask me, "What do *you* think?"

I knew I had a problem that wasn't going away, and I could see my career going down the drain. But I couldn't see how the problem was all in my head. Some of my best friends were doing the same things that I was, or worse, and it was not affecting their ability to sing.

He asked me about how I felt about my mom and dad's divorce. I could see my pattern of going from wife to wife and woman to woman, but at the time, I couldn't connect my addictive behavior to my parents' divorce.

Jerry bradley, my producer, knew something was wrong. I kept dodging his phone calls. When I would talk to him, he could hear the choking in my throat. I was able to control my breath just long enough to be audible.

Jerry would set a session. "How you feelin'?" he'd say. And me, in a high voice, "Oh, I'm doing okay. Give me the date, give me the time." I still couldn't tell the record label there was a problem with my voice, because I didn't know what the problem was.

My record sales began to plummet. At least that's what they told me. I never saw a statement. And if I had gotten a statement, it would only be their figures. Now, I'm not saying that I had a lot of money coming. I don't know. But how could a man have as many Top 20 and Top 10 hits as I had and not sell any records?

Still, I never had another hit like "Whiskey River." I don't know if it was because of my voice problem. Probably not. Although I could hear the difference in my singing voice, and the producers heard it, most of the average fans didn't seem to.

The industry was changing then. You know how it runs in cycles. It was not so much how I was singing but what I was singing. A lot of producers in Nashville had come over from rock and roll. They didn't want to hear steel guitars and fiddles and the shuffle beat. They didn't want to hear "Woman (Sensuous Woman)" and "It's the Last Time I'll Ever Cheat On You." These were cheatin' songs.

After *Red Headed Stranger*, Nashville jumped on the Willie wagon. They wanted outlaw music. At one point they were signing everybody with a beard.

Also, you gotta remember the political side of this thing. To get on those charts, labels have to spend money. There is a budget. How many artists at that time were on RCA? There's just so much money. A big man like Eddy Arnold or Charley Pride would get most of the bud-

get. Then you'd have people like Porter and Dolly, they'd start asking, "Hey, what happened? Our *Billboard* ad wasn't in there."

Well, I was the new kid on the block at RCA. When Jerry Bradley moved upstairs to take over some of Chet Atkins's executive duties, he turned me over to another producer, Ray Pennington, to get away from the problem: Johnny Bush couldn't perform like he once could.

Pennington produced my next two albums on RCA, *Here Comes the World Again* and *Texas Dancehall Girl*, plus one more that was never released. I got through the recording sessions with the help of a lot of overdubbing.

I wasn't happy with my singing on these albums. I was at about 75–80 percent of what I was at my best, but it was still better than a lot of the shit they were putting out at that time. That might sound pretentious, but I think it's truthful.

My records always had top-quality musicianship. On my version of "Home in San Antone," which was only released as a single at the time, I did something that had never been done before. We used two pedal steel guitars, Buddy Emmons and Curley Chalker. Both of them soloed on the recording. I liked what both of them did, but in my opinion, it settled the argument once and for all as to who was the best steel guitarist in the world.

Here Comes the World Again had a song on it called "Green Snakes on the Ceiling" that is still the second most-requested tune in my repertoire, after "Whiskey River." Ray Pennington brought the song to my attention. I thought he was joking because it was such a departure from what I'd been doing. I'd done drinking songs before, but this was a song about a man with the DTs, delirium tremens, I think they call them.

I couldn't tell if it was intended to be a funny song or a serious song. As I now know, it's a seriously funny song:

One fool on a stool
One drink to a hand
No thread for your needle
No, ma'am, I ain't seen your man
Anything you want to tell me
I got no time for
Just order your drink
And make room for more

What is there to like? But for some reason, the college kids love it. What is the appeal to a college student of a song about a man with the DTs? I swear I don't know. I ask them how they heard it. They say, "Our parents used to come to your dances, and they bought the vinyl. We grew up listening to your music."

Is that being a bad influence on a minor? Might be, but their parents are the ones that bought the album. I recut "Green Snakes" in 2001 and made it the title track of an album. That same album includes another drunk song, "Dos Tacos." It's my youngest granddaughter's favorite song.

OF COURSE, the fact that I couldn't do much to help the label promote my career didn't make them want to do much for me either. As much as possible, I tried to avoid interviews on radio and with the press. When I couldn't get out of it, I'd give one-word answers. That's not what people in the media want to hear.

Signing autographs after the show was another challenge. Country audiences like to shake hands or take a picture with you. They want the closeness. I developed a method to my madness: I programmed myself to give one-word answers, not to go into sentences:

"How you doin', John?"

"Great."

Before, singing had been a high, a euphoria like I'd never experienced. To shake those high notes coming from the bottom of my gut—it would buckle my knees. People were getting off to it, and I got off on the fact that they were getting off to it. The energy that I would derive from the audience reaction was a better stimulant than I could find in any bottle.

When I'd come home to San Antone and play the Municipal Auditorium with those package shows, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that everybody in that 7,000-seat auditorium loved Johnny Bush with all their heart. When they announced me, the screaming and the applause was so exhilarating, I would run to that microphone. I knew I was at my best, and I loved being there, and I couldn't wait for the next show. I was addicted to performing. I wasn't happy unless I was doing that.

Whatever stage fright I felt was along the lines of, "Can I get it? Can I do what I want to do, and put it across? Can I have them accept what I'm trying to put across?"

But once the records started hitting and people started showing up, then the barrier was down. Man, I was Secretariat in the lead and I knew it.

But now I became fearful of performing because I never knew what was going to come out. The worst part was facing an audience, knowing I had two shows to do, and after I sang a couple of songs, my voice would be completely gone.

I knew I had to do something visual if I couldn't sing a full set. Doing twenty or thirty minutes and then running to the bus was not getting it. But I couldn't face it. I just flat couldn't handle it. The embarrassment was too much.

The only instrument I was good at was the drums, but that wouldn't keep me in the spotlight. I had always loved the fiddle. Finally, I said, "Screw it. What have I got to lose?" Got me a fiddle. Got me an amplifier.

I picked it up pretty quick. The fiddle is really two instruments. The bow is an instrument all its own. The left-handed fingering on the neck of the fiddle itself was pretty easy because I already played guitar. But to drag that bow across the strings and get a decent tone without a screech takes practice. So, going down the highway, the fiddle players in my band would show me the basics, and I would practice, practice, practice.

Bush learning to play the fiddle with Merle Haggard, left, in Redding, California, 1972.

I would learn the lead part, and I had two other fiddle players playing the other parts, so they covered me up good enough to where it didn't sound half bad. People loved it, and I stayed visual.

Alabama had a hit in the 1980s called "If You're Gonna Play in Texas, You Better Have a Fiddle in the Band." Alabama was never that popular in Texas, because they didn't play dances. But I would say that was good advice then, and still is. I can't think of a country or western-swing dance band in Texas without one, two, or even three fiddles. George Strait's band has a great fiddler, Gene Elders. My favorite young Texas swing fiddle player, Ricky Turpin, played with Asleep at the Wheel for a few years and now works with me about ninety percent of the time, playing twin fiddles with Jeff Chance.

I think the reason fiddles are so popular in Texas is because of the different musical traditions we have here. The German, Czech, and Polish communities had their own family-oriented dance halls in South and Central Texas. The fiddle was one of the lead instruments in polka bands. When I was with the Texas Top Hands, if we didn't play a Czech polka at least once a night, we didn't come back. Also, Mexican mariachis use fiddles, and there is a tradition of jazz and blues fiddle playing.

In West Texas, it was house dances. They'd move all the furniture out of two rooms, and the fiddle player would stand in the doorway that separated the two rooms. This is how Bob Wills' father, Uncle John Wills, started out in the early 1900s. With just a fiddle, nothing else, playing hoedowns and breakdowns—they're really one and the same—and waltzes. A West Texas fiddler named Eck Robertson recorded the first fiddle breakdown back in the 1920s. One side was called "The Arkansas Traveler" and the other side was "Sallie Gooden," a traditional fiddle tune that is still played all the time at Texas fiddle contests.

Bob Wills learned how to play hoedown fiddle from his father. One of Bob's wives was a violin teacher who helped him perfect his bowing arm. But what he really loved was jazz and blues, even though he couldn't improvise and it would take him days to learn a new song. So he would always hire swing fiddlers such as Louis Tierney (Bob's favorite, according to Merle Haggard) and Jesse Ashlock to play alongside him in the Texas Playboys. Also Joe Holley, who was left-handed. When he would solo, it was strictly a jazz solo. That's when Bob would holler "Ah, Jody!" Later, in the early 1950s, Johnny Gimble and Keith Coleman kept this twin-fiddle tradition going. You also had Cecil Brower and Cliff Bruner, great swing fiddlers who played with singer

Milton Brown, who started out with Bob Wills in the Lightcrust Doughboys before forming his own band, the Musical Brownies. He died in an auto accident in the late 1930s. If he had lived, he might have been as big as Bob. And then there was J.R. Chatwell, who played with Adolph Hoffner in San Antonio, and Lefty Williams, who was with Shelton Brothers out of Dallas. All these guys were inspired by jazz violinists Joe Venuti and later, Stéphane Grappelli. They would play about thirty-two bars of the melody and then start improvising. The improvisation and swing feeling came from jazz.

This is what makes Texas fiddle different from bluegrass. I love bluegrass, but it's not dance music. Texas fiddle is made for dancing. Bob Wills innovated the twin-fiddles sound, where one fiddle would play lead and the other would play the harmony notes. That sound defined Texas country in the 1930s and '40s. You'll get a swing player that can't play bluegrass, and a bluegrass player that can't swing. It's like mixing oil and water. Oftentimes, they don't want to do it. They want to play what they play.

In the 1950s, the big western-swing bands gave way to smaller groups that played the honky-tonks, and this style of music became known as honky-tonk. Honky-tonk music stayed in a three-chord pattern, where western-swing was more musically sophisticated. Honky-tonk fiddle, as we played it in Texas, was a combination of western swing and Cajun, which was very popular in East Texas. Harry Choates, a Cajun fiddler and jazz guitar player from Port Arthur, Texas, had a big country hit with "Jole Blon." Even today it's one of the most requested fiddle tunes. It's a waltz, played on two strings, similar to bluegrass. Tommy Jackson, who played with Ray Price and on my early records, was the epitome of a honky-tonk fiddle player—a combination of Bob Wills swing and Cajun. I had a Cajun fiddler, Frenchie Burke, in my first band. The Hayes brothers, Big Red and Little Red, came out of Big Sandy in East Texas. They could do it all—honky-tonk, jazz, old-time breakdowns. Little Red played with me in the Cherokee Cowboys. Big Red was with Ray before us. He died of a heart attack while working with Faron Young in Germany. The number one honky-tonk fiddler today, in my opinion, would be Hank Singer. He lives in Nashville now, but he's from West Texas. Hank can swing, but if you're talkin' Hank Williams' gutbucket honky-tonk, he plays his ass off. He's the best double-stop player in the business. If you listen to the George Jones song "Choices," you can hear Hank playing double-stop.

The greatest Texas swing fiddler alive today, with no question in

my mind, is Johnny Gimble. He played with the Texas Playboys in the late 1940s and early '50s. In the mid 1960s, he moved to Nashville and became a first-call session player. He was voted Instrumentalist of the Year at least eight times by the Country Music Association. In the mid 1960s, I played in Willie's trio with Wade Ray, who played bass and swing fiddle. After Willie formed the band I fronted in the late '60s, he didn't carry a fiddle. But he would always use Johnny Gimble on his records when the song called for a fiddle. Gimble now lives in Dripping Springs, Texas, near Willie's place. In 1989, Gimble recorded an album called *The Texas Fiddle Collection*, where he went from breakdowns to Bob Wills to jazz and swing tunes. He claims that the first Texas fiddler was Davy Crockett, who brought his fiddle with him from Tennessee to the Alamo. Johnny also has recorded with and plays reunions with the surviving members of the Texas Playboys in a band called Playboys II.

When I was learning to play the fiddle, I had no illusions or aspirations to become the next Johnny Gimble. I was just trying to stay visual and play the type of music we were doing then. I always surrounded myself with the best fiddlers available, and I'd like to mention them by name—Ernie Reed, John Schattenberg, Ron Knuth (who gave me my fiddle, a 100-year-old Maggini), Hank Singer, and Bobby Flores. When you have two great fiddle players playing with you when you're learning, you don't sound so bad. Much later, I took lessons from Sebastian Campesi, a jazz virtuoso who studied with Venuti and Grappelli and played for years with the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra.

I began to build my own little repertoire of fiddle tunes, from "Faded Love" to "The Farmer's Daughter" to the "Cotton-Eyed Joe" to the Schottische. When I'd feel the tightness in my voice getting really bad, I'd play the fiddle. That'd give me a seven- to twelve-minute rest. Then I'd sing another song. Then I'd ask one of the boys to sing. I'd play another song. That way I could stay visual for an hour.

Half the time, people on the dance floor didn't know if I was singing or not, but they could look up and I'd still be onstage. Made the club owner happy, and we got paid.

12

MAN WITH NO SOUL AT ALL

If a man could hear the melody playing in your mind
And not respond to nature's perfect call
If your laughter didn't make him want to love you
He'd be a man with no soul at all

—"MAN WITH NO SOUL AT ALL," WRITTEN BY JOE BOB BARNHILL, PAT BUNCH, AND JIMMY CHAPPELL, RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

THE RCA DEAL OFFICIALLY TERMINATED early in 1975, three years after I started having problems with my voice. They wrote me a real nice letter saying, "We have not enjoyed our working relationship with you these past three years . . ." It hadn't been a picnic for me, either. It wasn't their fault that I had this problem, but they weren't very sympathetic about it. Business is business.

At my last RCA date in 1974, I cut a song called "Man with No Soul at All." This guy—I don't know who he was—walked into the session with a tape of that song in his hand, which is just not done, you

know? He handed it to my producer, Ray Pennington, and said, "This would be a good song for Johnny Bush." Ray had the engineer play it right then, and I said, "I'll cut it." I liked it that much.

The song, in a way, was mirroring my life. I had felt helpless, hoping my vocal problems would pass. When I heard that song, "To be a man with no soul at all," well, those are great lyrics, and we cut it right there on the spot. But the song was never released by RCA. I finally leased the master and released it on one of the greatest-hits compilations I sell at my gigs.

How would my career have turned out if it had not have been for my voice problem? Tommy Hill, my longtime friend and coproducer at Stop, told me he thought I could have been a superstar. Maybe I could have gone as far as Willie. There was a point, in the late '60s and early '70s, when I *was* higher on the charts and making more money than he was.

OK, maybe I'm dreaming. Who can say what would have happened? I'm not complaining one bit about how lucky I am to go out now and sing for ninety minutes and draw a crowd. I'm very happy with that. And I'm glad Willie went as far as he did.

But I have no doubt that things would have turned out very differently had I not lost much of my ability to sing and talk right after I'd signed with a major label. I could not have predicted then that "Whiskey River" would turn out to be the peak of my career.

When you lose your ability to communicate, you are fucked. I've been in airline terminals where a flight would be delayed or cancelled, and I'd have to go talk to somebody. Most people take these things for granted.

I'd get to the counter: "Yes, sir, can I help you?"

No words would come. I'd have to turn away and go into the men's room. I'd say to myself, "Look, take your time. Breathe easy. I'm going to say, 'The flight will be rescheduled when? When can I work out my route?'" And then, after rehearsing it, I would go back and talk to the ticket agent. That's what I would have to do.

There weren't any cell phones then. If I wanted to use the telephone to call collect, I would have to talk to an operator. She'd say, "Operator," and I'd say "Ah-hhhh-hhh . . ." and it was over. They wouldn't give me the time to say, "Collect call from Johnny Bush."

Man, you talk about being alone.

Mary Lou was sympathetic, to some degree. The truth is, she was pissed off that I was screwing around, and that overrode the sympathy. We were divorced in 1974, shortly before I was dropped by RCA.

I continued to go to psychologists. I spent a ton of money getting evaluated. A lot of that time was not wasted. I loved studying psychology, how people tick, what your different egos are, what causes you to respond to certain things. The study of human behavior.

But it wasn't helping my voice. Nothing I did seemed to help my voice. The psychologists didn't know what the hell was going on. They suggested it was psychosomatic, which is a big word meaning "We don't know what the fuck is wrong with you."

I kept thinking that whatever it was would go away as quick as it came on, like a cold. I kept telling myself that, especially when the medical doctors couldn't find a problem.

So I thought, "I'll hide from it. I'll run to the bus after the show, and I won't sign autographs. I won't do interviews with reporters because I can't, but I'll make some excuse. I'm sick . . . I have a sore throat"—anything I could think of.

Even when my voice was at its weakest, I never had a club owner refuse to pay me, though I had a few of them bitch because I didn't stay up there longer. At shows, I had a set program. I told the bass player to call out the set list loud enough for the band to hear them, because I couldn't announce them. That was all right for a concert. But it's hard to run a dance like that when people are bringing requests. A dance is another ballgame.

I became a robot. I'd go out and do forty minutes, tops, and run to the bus. The band would play awhile, and I'd go back out and try to do another set. This went on for years. Later on, after I learned to play the fiddle, I was able to stay up on the bandstand longer, but I was still uncomfortable talking with fans or reporters.

You can only get away with that for so long.

The audiences started thinning out, and I wasn't getting their attention any more like I used to. I think they sensed something was wrong. It was like they didn't care. They'd dance and drink and dance some more, and then they'd just leave. That excitement wasn't there any more.

And it was because of me. Instead of the excitement and thrill of being out there, it was fear and dread that was dragging me out onto the stage. Half of me was saying, "I wish they'd just leave me alone." And

the other half of me was saying, "Man, this is what you've wanted all of your life! What the hell's the matter with you?"

You finally see your dream coming true, but the dream runs into reality and you can't handle it. It's a helpless panic.

People never booed me, but I'd hear, "Hey, what the hell's the matter? What's wrong with your voice? What's the matter with *you*?"

And I'd want to say, "I don't know, I don't know what it is."

Texas audiences still came out to the shows, but the No. 1 question I had to live with at every performance—and still do, to this day—was, "How's your voice?"

The minute somebody asked me that—before I learned to control my feelings—I would become almost enraged. I wanted to reach out and strangle them. My first impulse was to say, "You ignorant motherfucker! Haven't you been listening to the last hour? Don't ask me—you tell me how it was!"

I can't say that to people, though. Half of them who would ask me a question like that probably have never listened closely to my old records. They just throw it at me: "How is your voice?"

So now, I just say "Perfect." And I clear it out of my mind.

Bob Claypool, who was an influential music critic with the *Houston Post*, took a liking to me. He put out some real good press. He started calling me the "Country Caruso." Thank God the country people didn't know who Caruso was!

At my lowest point, I guess I was singing at about 55 to 60 percent of my peak ability. People were hearing little more than half of what I was capable of.

The worst part was before a show. People were paying money to hear "My Cup Runneth Over" and "You Gave Me A Mountain," and I knew I couldn't do them justice. If I had lowered the keys I was singing in, it would have been better, but I still thought that I had to perform a song each night exactly the way I had recorded it because that was the way people heard it. And at the high range I was singing in, and with the emotion I put into a song, it was very draining. Even to a young man.

I mean, listen to some of my early records. I've had disc jockeys say, "How in the hell did you last as long as you did?"

I CONTINUED to see different doctors. The singer David Houston referred me to an ENT guy in Shreveport, who in turn referred me

to an allergist in Fredericksburg, in the Texas Hill Country. That guy told me I was allergic to molds and dust and to stay out of these motel rooms and get rid of all the carpet in my house. He gave me little vials of stuff to take home and inject myself with.

But my voice still didn't get any better. The worse it got, the more depressed I got. I really believed I was the only person in the world who had this. I was convinced that God was punishing me. God gave me a gift, and I abused it by committing adultery. It was like God said, "OK, big boy, you think you're so smart. I'll take it all away from you. I gave it to you. I'll take it away."

I made a lot of ground with a psychologist in San Antonio named Smith. He told me I was kicking my own ass, and I probably was: guilt.

I told him about my new single, which was on the charts at the time: "When My Conscience Hurts the Most." This was the last *Billboard* hit I had, by the way. It was originally a record we'd cut for Stop that had never been released. We released it in 1978 on my own Whiskey River label with Tommy Hill's permission.

The song had a line that went, "Why do I always feel the best when my conscience hurts the most?" The psychologist said, "I figured that."

Hank Cochran used to ask himself: "Do you have to be a miserable son of a bitch all the time to write a hit song now and then?" I don't know. But in my case, it was certainly true. All my life I had been channeling my emotions into my music without fully realizing what I was doing. I always imagined that I was writing about somebody else's problem: "Thank God I'm not that guy."

But I *was* that guy. I don't think I've ever written a happy song. All my songs came from the negative, painful side.

As I said, the whole study of psychology and human behavior, it really, really interested me. Another psychiatrist got me interested in self-hypnosis and biofeedback. I still do that today.

My voice wasn't any better, but the psychologists started helping me to make some connections, learning about psychological trauma. It took me a long time to get the connection: getting kicked so bad when the girls started trying to commit suicide. That really did something to me. I thought that if they had died it would have been my fault. That's a psychological slam to the mind.

On top of everything else, in 1978 I came to find out I had hypoglycemia—too low a concentration of sugar in the blood. I literally felt terrible all the time. I woke up more tired than I was when I went to

bed. I really thought I was going nuts. Alcohol made me feel better; I didn't know it was the sugar in the alcohol that I needed to stay level.

Then I read a story that Burt Reynolds had passed out in Nashville after he ate half of a banana pudding that Tammy Wynette—who he was involved with at the time—had made for him. He was diagnosed with hypoglycemia, and I thought, "Ah-ha!"

Your blood sugar drops and adrenaline takes over—you get hyper, you sweat, and you panic. It's the reverse of a diabetic; hypoglycemic people don't have enough sugar, whereas a diabetic has too much. (I wonder if a lot of alcoholics are really hypoglycemic.)

You don't take medicine for hypoglycemia. You have to change your diet and your lifestyle. No more alcohol, no more sugars. Even though you have low sugar in your system, you're not supposed to eat sugar. You treat it with a diet of high proteins and low carbohydrates.

Boy, I started feeling better right away. Trimmed down, started working out. I stayed off alcohol for a whole year. I'm a pretty self-disciplined guy when I put my mind to it. To this day, I won't have caffeine, I won't have sugar. I'll have a little piece of pie or a cookie, but nothing with granulated sugars.

Another doctor put me on a diet that included eating breakfast every day, and I've never been a breakfast person. The panic attacks that I'd had since I was a little boy went away.

BUT I STILL couldn't talk. In the end, the doctors couldn't tell me why. It took a speech therapist to finally say the words: spasmodic dysphonia.

Her name was Linda Sparkman. I met her in 1978 through my attorney. She was a client of his, and he introduced us. Since she was a speech therapist, I started going to her for vocal therapy. She was also beautiful, and single, and one thing led to another. We went out for about a year. My problems with my voice didn't bother her because that's how she made her living.

Some colleges and universities had started doing surveys on spasmodic dysphonia. I found out I wasn't alone. It was a condition, and there are other people who have it. The reason I would get hoarse is that I had to force the air through the vocal cords because they were slamming shut. Approximately one in 35,000 people suffers from spasmodic dysphonia. No one really knows what causes it, but they talk about it being brought on by physical or emotional trauma.

Here is how you can experience what someone with spasmodic dysphonia goes through: expel all the breath out of your lungs, and then try to say something. "Ahhhh-hhh-hhh . . ." You can't do it. There's no air left.

As I learned more about spasmodic dysphonia, I was still self-conscious about my condition, but at least I knew what it was. There were other people going through this; I wasn't alone. I had to experiment on what worked for me. If I tried to push too much air through my vocal cords, they would spasm and close down. By holding the breath down in the diaphragm and letting it out slowly, I could enunciate in short bursts.

ALL THIS TIME I had been struggling to keep my career afloat. Although my singing voice was only 60–70 percent of what it had been in my prime, there was nothing else I could do where I could make the same kind of money in a night as I could performing.

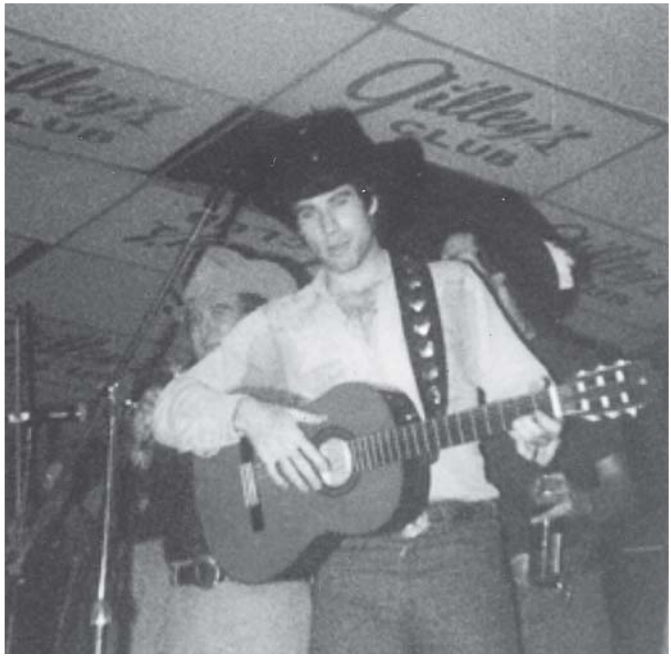
Each performance was an emotionally draining experience. Imagine Arnold Palmer teeing up the ball at a tournament in front of the world and being unable get off the tee box. Can you imagine what he'd be feeling? That's the way I felt onstage.

Even without my spasmodic dysphonia, I was getting older. But I was still trying to sing in the same keys that I had always sung in. As you get older, you lose the elasticity in your voice. By that, I mean your vocal cords not only open and close when you breathe and phonate, but they have to stretch like rubber bands to get from one pitch to another in singing. And like rubber bands, they get weaker and less able to stretch over time. That's when it's time for a singer to lower his keys a half-tone, a tone, or even a tone and a half or two.

But I hadn't learned that at the time. By punching out the lyrics and striving for the higher tones, I caused my vocal cords to swell. I couldn't sing three to six nights a week any more; I could only work one or two. I couldn't stay on the bandstand long. It hurt my reputation.

It should have been a good time for me. *Urban Cowboy*, starring John Travolta and Debra Winger, came out in 1980 and had made my old hometown of Houston look hip. I told Sherwood Cryer, who co-owned Gilley's in Pasadena, where the movie was filmed, "This is gonna help everybody."

I thought it was gonna help everybody because it brought national attention to what we were doing in Texas. But it didn't. It was good for



Urban Cowboy*: Bush onstage with John Travolta at Gilley's in Pasadena, Texas, 1979.*

Mickey Gilley and Johnny Lee, who had a hit on the sound track, but it was a bubble that burst in a hurry.

In 1978, I had formed my own independent record label, Whiskey River Records. I recorded a studio album, *Amarillo Depot*, and followed it up in 1980 with a double-live album I recorded at the other big honky-tonk in Houston besides Gilley's, Dance Town USA.

Jobs were falling out. Bills were coming down on me. Crash Stewart had died, and I didn't have a booking agent. In the early '80s a nightclub venture I went into on the Bandera Highway folded, and I lost thirty grand in ninety days. This was borrowed money, by the way, which I had to pay back.

Running my own label turned out to be yet another mistake. It got to be the same old story, like with Stop Records: the distributors weren't paying us. They would order three or four hundred albums, and come time to pay us, they'd send half of them back as returns and we never got paid for the ones they kept.

Not long after the *Dance Town USA* album came out, Whiskey

River Records was bought up by another independent Texas label called Delta Records. In 1982, I recorded a duet album with Willie, *Together Again*, for Delta. We cut it at Willie's Pedernales Studio.

By this time, Willie had become a bona fide superstar. *Red Headed Stranger* had kicked off the outlaw era in the mid-'70s, and then *Stardust*, his album of pop standards, had made him a household word all over the world. Willie knew there was an audience that had never heard these old standards. That damn thing stayed on the charts for ten years.

Willie can get away with shit that a normal person can't. Case in point: Robert Goulet fucks up "The Star-Spangled Banner," and it almost ends his career. Willie does it at the Democratic National Convention in New York City, a capella—no guitar. He left out part of the song, and was praised for his performance. One critic called it the "Texas version."

When the album came out on Delta, it got a five-star rating in *Billboard*. David Stallings, the owner of Delta, called me and said, "We got a bite from Columbia," which was Willie's label at the time. He said, "I think they're wanting to buy this, and if I get what I'm asking for it, I'll give you half of it."

And I thought, "This could be the answer to my prayers." Of course, David got greedy. He turned down Columbia's offer and said he was going to handle it on his own. The album went nowhere. It crashed and burned. And that was the end of that.

In hindsight, I'm glad that more people didn't hear the album with Willie because that was when my voice was nearly at its worst. The next year, I made a solo album called *I Can Feel Him Touching You (All Over Me)*, and that was the bottom, the worst performance I've ever recorded. The songs were great, but my voice was terrible. I was trying to sing in the same keys I sang in when I was on Stop, and that was a big mistake.

I can't even listen to that album now. I wish I could recall all the copies and have them destroyed. But as bad luck would have it, it's become a collector's item.

MY ILL-FATED AFFAIR with Charlsie finally ended in 1977. Then I dated my speech therapist, Linda Sparkman, for about a year. I liked her a lot, but marriage was never on the table. There were other girlfriends along the way, but nothing serious. I'd been single since 1974.

In the summer of 1979 an old friend had called me to do a private party in Curtain, Texas. The band and I went over to play, and there I saw one of the prettiest girls I'd ever seen in my life sitting at this table. You remember *Charlie's Angels*, the TV show? Do you remember Jaclyn Smith? She had those sorts of features. But she was prettier.

A friend of my dad's, this big guy named Johnny Castleberry, was at the party. He walked up and said, "I'd like you to meet Adrianna." Yeah, I was glad to.

I was forty-three at the time. She turned out to be twenty-three, twenty years younger than I was. I swear she looked older. I thought she was thirtyish. We talked, and I said, "How you doing?" And she said, "Better now." We had a few drinks and she gave me her phone number.

A couple of weeks later, I was playing in Dance Town USA in Houston, and she came up to see me. She was just drop-dead gorgeous, the belle of the ball. I think that's mainly what hooked me.

We started seeing each other regularly after that. I was popular, drew a big crowd, and had the bus, had the band. I don't think she thought that I was rich, but she knew I was capable of making good money. I explained to her that I had a speech impediment. It didn't seem to bother her in the beginning.

A lot of things bothered her later, after we were married. What bothered me is that she became a different person when she drank. Kind of like Martha Nelson, Willie's first wife.

I don't like admitting this, but Adrianna would piss me off so bad, I'd want to hit her. She'd say, "If you wanted to bad enough, you could talk. It's all in your head."

How could I not want to communicate? How could I not want to sing and perform like I once could? What possible reason could I have for being like this if it was within my power to get rid of it?

The next day after the drunk and the fight, she'd be like nothing ever happened. It was a new world and she'd be honey-this, and honey-that, sweet as she could be. But when she got to drinking, she became somebody else.

I'm not blaming her for anything, because I was so much older. I should have been smart enough to see the signs. She wasn't ready for marriage and neither was I.

IT PROBABLY DIDN'T HELP that we had a near-permanent houseguest for much of this period.

Johnny Bush with sometime roommate Ben Dorcy, on tour with the Cherokee Cowboys at the Maryland State Fair, 1965.

Ben Dorcy is what I guess you would call a classic character. He must have been the world's first roadie. He travels mostly on Willie's bus now, but he used to be John Wayne's valet. Honest to God. He also worked with Hank Thompson, Merle Kilgore, Ray Price, Buck Owens, Porter Wagoner, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash—everybody that was anybody in country music.

To me there's not another person like him. He must be eighty if he's a day. Willie and I have talked about it. We think Ben has hustled the whole world and that one day he's just going to turn around and laugh—"I had all you guys fooled!" He's that kind of individual.

I had him for about eight years. At the time I got to know him, we were both on the road with Price. He worked as a roadie for me, and he'd carry stuff in and out of the bus into the clubs, and he got paid a little bit. Plus, he'd cut the grass or cut a tree down or do some painting.

Sometimes he lived in the house. He needed a place to stay, and we'd been friends for many years.

Adrianna didn't mind it until Ben would get drunk. Being around Ben when he's drunk is an experience.

One time, he drove Adrianna's '79 Pontiac Grand Prix through the wall of the garage! He come up the driveway, slid it up into park and jumped out. He didn't quite make park, though. He was still in drive, and the car come right through the double doors. Sounded like an explosion.

As it turned out, he did me a favor. I'd been wanting to turn the garage into a den for many, many years, and I couldn't do it because I had so much shit. I had lawn mowers and shovels and lawn equipment, so I couldn't convert the garage into a den until I got a shed built. Ben sort of gave me the incentive, you might say. And the insurance company paid for it.

Ben deserves a book of his own.

ADRIANNA AND I got divorced in 1984. During our five-year marriage, I probably spent more nights on the bus—I had the bus parked outside—than I did in the house. And after I closed that door on the bus, she would hammer and beat on the door and throw rocks and scream and holler.

She got the best divorce lawyer in town. After the trial ended, I made a video. Elvis is singing "Blue Christmas" and I'm standing under this tree. The music fades, and I say, "See this beautiful home? It's not my home. See this beautiful tree? It's not my tree. After my divorce, I have enough money to last me the rest of my life, provided I die tomorrow, thanks to the Bastard Barrister."

It was some of my best work, if I do say so. Everybody including the lawyers loved it, except Adrianna.

I understand she's happily married now, and that's good. I hope she found what she was looking for.

AFTER THE DIVORCE I was so broke that I had to go to the University of Texas Health Science Center dental college to get my teeth worked on. I had an abscess that was swollen so bad that it looked like a golf ball in my cheek and I didn't have any money to go to the dentist.

I walk in and sit in the chair, and somebody says, "Aren't you Johnny Bush? What are *you* doing here?"

People think that if you're in the public eye and you're a songwriter and you make records and you've got a band that you must be rich. Some guys are, but I damn sure wasn't. I had to swallow my pride and sit there.

I think this was the lowest ebb of my life.

Not long afterwards, however, two things happened that gave me a glimmer of hope that things might start to turn around. The first was that I started working with a voice coach in Austin named Gary Catona. Gary was a former opera singer who had developed a series of exercises for building up strength around the vocal cords. Darrell Royal, the ex–University of Texas football coach and a country music fan, and Larry Trader, who is one of Willie's old cronies and the golf pro at Pedernales, had him call me.

As I've told you, I was still trying to sing in the same keys that I was singing in when I was on Stop. Gary knocked that stupid idea out of me. He said, "You've got to lower your keys—you can't sing high anymore, brother. You're too fuckin' old."

I said, "OK, yeah, right."

And then he said, "I want you to do these exercises every day with this series of Italian vowels. Your teeth have to be at a certain angle. Your jaw has to be at a certain angle. And your head has to be at a certain angle. You'll open up the back of your throat as you sing the vowels at different levels of the scale." He told me that the reason Italian opera singers have such powerful voices is because if you speak Italian correctly, you are actually strengthening your vocal cords.

"Right now," he said, "your vocal cords are flaccid; they're weak. But if your arms are weak, imagine if we take barbells every day and start building them up. We're going to do that with your vocal cords."

Sounds easy, doesn't it? A thirty-minute session with Gary Catona was as tiring as going out and loading hundred-pound sacks of sand for thirty minutes. It was physically exhausting. But I noticed my voice would be getting stronger and stronger.

Any part of your body—I don't care what it is—once you stop using it, you lose it. You have your arm in a cast for eight or ten weeks, when you take it out of the cast, it's much smaller than your other arm. Your voice, if you can't talk, gets weaker and weaker and weaker.

These exercises that Catona put me through started building my

voice back up. He brought my speaking voice back by bringing out a new register I didn't know I had. I still do those exercises to this day.

On all my old records, you'll hear midranges and highs. I didn't have any lows. I couldn't do that. Well, with these exercises, it started building these muscles up to where I had another range I wasn't aware of. That's where I started talking, and I found out I was a baritone and not a tenor.

Gary lives in Los Angeles now, where he works with singers, actors, and celebrities, including Shirley MacLaine, Paula Abdul, and Muhammad Ali.

I did have allergies at certain times of the year from pollen or molds. So I started taking shots for that. Along with the vocal exercises, and the glycerin-and-water spray I used to moisten my throat, I got back to singing at about 85 percent of what I once could, but in a lower register.

I started feeling better about life. I could use the phone again, and I could shout if I had to. Couldn't do that before.

THE OTHER THING that happened to me at around this time was that I started going out with a woman named Lynda Killian.

At the time I met her, she was going with one of my good friends, Tommy Powers. He was my golfing partner, and I'd known the guy all my life. Lynda was also a friend of Adrianna's. The four of us—Adrianna and I, and Linda and Tommy—would go out to Trinity, in East Texas, every year, where I held the Johnny Bush Golf Tournament. It raised money for scholarships for kids in Trinity. All my friends would go.

I'd be up there for a week, and Adrianna would leave after a couple of days. There was no big thing between Lynda and Tommy. She'd come over and call on me, and we'd go out to eat or I'd go over to her place. We probably knew each other for three years as friends before we became involved romantically.

It was not love at first sight. But I'd finally met the woman I should have been married to twenty years earlier.

13

TIME CHANGES EVERYTHING

When you left my poor heart was broken
Our romance seemed all in vain
The dark clouds are gone and there's blue skies again
'Cause time changes everything

—"TIME CHANGES EVERYTHING," WRITTEN BY TOMMY DUNCAN, RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, I thought this speech problem was God's way of punishing me for my sinful behavior. I thought that I had been cursed.

When I joined the Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio about sixteen years ago, the pastor, the Reverend Buckner Fanning, told me, "God doesn't want to hurt you. God loves you." He said, "You know how much you love your daughter and your grandchildren? That's nothing compared to how much He loves you. Would you punish your

grandchildren by taking their voices away if they displeased you? No. He wouldn't do that to you, either."

Buckner Fanning has helped me so much. Never once have I heard him preach hellfire and damnation. He's always very positive and upbeat: "God loves you. Your sins are forgiven if you believe."

When a hurricane destroyed a church in Corpus Christi one time, Buckner invited the Catholics to hold their services in the gymnasium of our church if they wanted to. The Baptist convention come down on him real hard for that. He replied, "What would Jesus have done?" Nuff said.

I know some people might say that it is not right for me to call myself a Christian and then go into honky-tonks and dance halls to sing drinking songs for people. It took me a long time, with Buckner's help, to convince myself that what I have is a God-given talent, and I am good at what I do.

I have always tried to choose the songs that, when I listened to the lyric, I felt it. I knew that other people out there had lived the same things as I did and felt the same pain I felt. I was trying to convey a message. Most of the songs I've had hits with have been about broken love, people trying to get over someone or find someone new.

Emotion. That's all it is.

I would like for people to understand that a singer should have the same poetic license, if you will, that an actor has. An actor reads a screenplay, and he adapts himself to the character he's going to play. He has to be convincing for you to believe his part. If he's playing the part of a heroin addict, like Frank Sinatra did in *The Man with the Golden Arm*, it doesn't necessarily mean that he is or ever was, or is ever going to be, a heroin addict.

I think the man that makes records should have the same license as that actor does. An actor in a movie has two hours, and you can see him. A singer has to tell his story in two and a half minutes, and he's invisible on a recording. So how do you put your story across with as much emotion or phrasing or however you can feel the lyric to convey that message to the listener? They can't see your pain. They can only hear it.

If I sing a drinking song or a cheating song, it doesn't mean that that's what I am today. I can understand the part, and God knows I have lived the part, but I want to make the distinction clear to my fellow members of the Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio.

I can be a Christian and I can love God, and I know God loves me and I know that I've been forgiven. At the same time, I go into saloons

and honky-tonks and sing drinking songs. Some people would say that makes me a hypocrite: "How can you be a good Christian and go to church and say you love the Lord, and next Saturday night you go to a skull orchard somewhere and sing 'There Stands the Glass'?"

Because I'm an actor, that's why.

And besides—tell me one drinking song that has actually condoned drinking. I don't think there's one song that I have recorded that would entice somebody to leave his wife or to go out and get drunk. If you read the lyrics, every song I ever sang—including "Whiskey River," "There Stands the Glass" and "Green Snakes on the Ceiling"—emphasized how dreadful that behavior makes you feel, how bad it was. A lot of my songs say, "Look at what I've done and look at what happened. Look where I am now."

MY BROTHER'S name is Gene. He and I were close at one time, but we were as different as two guys can be. Maybe it's because of the fact that after the divorce he lived with Mom and I lived with Dad, which put us in two different schools.

The one thing I can remember us having in common is that he can really sing. He and I would sing together. He'd sing harmony to my lead, and we had a little act. But he lost interest in that. He sings in church now and will sing nothing or have nothing to do with any music unless it's gospel.

Have I mentioned that he's a Baptist preacher? Like I said, we are as different as two brothers can be. At the same time, I'm very, very proud of the fact that he chose to follow the Lord's work and proud of how much good he has done.

I don't know how proud he is of me for my accomplishments. I know several times he's invited me to sing at his churches, which I have. I've never declined when I could make it.

But we do travel in two different circles. I don't want to start preaching, but my Bible says that Jesus went to parties all the time. Every night they were at somebody's house. And He said wherever one or two or three people meet in his name, there He shall be also. Which means right under a tree can become a church. A church is just a building. The people are the church.

Where Gene and I disagree the most, I think, is about the wine. Baptist churches have communion, and they serve grape juice at communion. Gene claims that when the Bible says when Jesus turned the

water into wine at the wedding feast—Jesus' first miracle—that it was grape juice. It was not the alcoholic beverage that we know as wine.

Well, I disagree. I think it was wine, and not only do I think it was wine, I think it was good wine. Jesus made it, after all.

I asked my pastor, Buckner Fanning, that very question. I said, "Don't you think Jesus drank wine?" And he said, "Of course he did, and lots of it."

So why do we have grape juice at communion? Nobody's able to answer that for me. I know in a Lutheran church it's real wine. I know that in a Catholic church it's real wine. But not in a Baptist church.

On the fundamentalist side, dancing is also a no-no. Buckner Fanning and his wife and kids came to hear me and Willie at the Cabaret Club dance hall in Bandera ten years ago. He didn't drop dead the next day.

In one of Buckner's sermons, he was talking about depression and how this woman was so depressed. He said, "You know what I told her? Get up, buy her a pair of red shoes, and go to a Johnny Bush dance!" I thought that was so cool.

You know why Baptists don't have sex standing up? They're afraid people might think they're dancing. I guess I'd have to talk to my brother and see how he feels about that.

At the time I met Lynda, I was still married to Adrianna. I know it sounds like the beginning of the same old pattern, but it's really not. Lynda was a friend of Adrianna's also. I didn't date Lynda while I was living with Adrianna, but we were separated for a year or two before the final divorce.

When Adrianna left, Lynda and I started seeing each other and going places. I'd go over to her place, and she'd cook supper. She was just a good friend. After Adrianna filed for divorce, we started seeing each other pretty regularly.

Lynda was not a country fan. She didn't know who Johnny Bush was when we met. Hell, she didn't know who Merle Haggard was. You could play a record and she wouldn't know the steel guitar from the lead guitar or the fiddle from the mandolin. She liked the Rolling Stones. I've never held that against her.

I think the reason we became friends was that we shared the same

*Johnny and Lynda Bush, with the Reverend Buckner Fanning (*center*), on their wedding day, 1988.*

sense of humor. She liked to laugh and so did I. Her sense of humor is real hip, like a musician's.

We got married in 1988, after we'd been going together for about three years. After we got married and she moved in with me, she started learning the music business. She learned real quick, and pretty soon she started doing the booking. Up until that time, I'd had a guy who worked for me do the booking. Gradually, she started handling all the books—the payroll records, income tax, household accounts.

I've never had a manager, but if I had one, it would be someone who does what she does: books the jobs, negotiates the money, calls the guys in the band, schedules the bus—she does it all.

We are together 98 percent of the time because we choose to be. Sometimes people marry for the wrong reasons. You can love somebody and not like them. Love based on physical attraction alone is not a basis for marriage. I know. I've been there.

Lynda is not only my wife and business partner, she is my best friend. At the time we met, I was attracted to Lynda for her physical beauty. But it was her inner beauty that I really fell in love with. She has a beautiful soul. I love her for the person she is. It's an inner feeling of peace that I've never felt with anyone else. We've never played head games.

Lynda does things for me that no one else ever has. It's little

things that would be insignificant to anybody else. She wants to please me, and that only strengthens the way that I feel about her.

I WAS STARTING to feel better about life again. I'd joined the church, I'd finally married the right woman, and my voice was getting stronger as a result of the exercises Gary Catona had showed me.

But my career was on life support. It had gotten to the point where I was playing these places and my crowds were falling off so bad that I was convinced that people didn't want to hear "Jim, Jack & Rose" and "You Ought to Hear Me Cry" anymore. And it wasn't like I was having no big time either. I was bored, the band was bored, and the audience could tell.

I would sit in the car with Lynda until the last minute. She'd try to encourage me. I forced myself to go on. I know it wasn't the showbiz glitz and glamour that attracted her to me. She came into my life when I was at the very rock bottom. There were times when we were so broke that we had to hock our jewelry to buy groceries and pay the bills.

It got so bad that one time we were driving home from the hock shop and she began to cry. I told her that this was no time for weakness. But I think she was really feeling bad for me. One positive thing about being on the bottom is that the only direction left to go is up.

I let the old band go on New Year's Day 1988 after a gig in Trinity. I said, "That's it, guys. That's the end of that."

Going home, I took a little detour through Shiro, down in Grimes County, and went to the old cemetery where my mother's people are buried. To this day, I don't know the reason why I had the desire to go there.

My grandma Sally Johnson is buried there. For some reason, I had to see her grave. And I stood at the grave and talked to her, not audibly, but with an inner voice: "Grandma, I'm your first-born grandchild . . . I don't know what to do. The things that have worked in the past are not working now. In fact, it's getting worse. I just fired the band and I have no jobs coming up. I'm at my wit's end. I have nothing."

I went back to the car and sat down. My drummer, Martin, was driving, and he rolled a joint. We smoked it, and then Lynda and I put up the curtain between the front seat and the back of the van. It was like a little time-out. We headed back toward San Antone with no idea of what tomorrow held in store.

Maybe my grandmother had already given me an answer: I had met this kid named Howard Davenport a few weeks earlier. He called me and said, "I want you to do some singles with my band. There's a market out there that really likes your stuff."

"Yeah," I said, "I've seen that market here of late. New Year's Eve I didn't have 200 people. Tell me I've got a market."

But these were fresh young pickers. Young guys. Knew my stuff down to a T. Their playing had some fire. So I started working with their band as a single.

The places Howard was booking me into around Houston, in Magnolia and Spring, we had crowds. And he said, "See, man, there's a market out there. You're our hero. You can't quit."

His fiddle player also played some sax, so we started doing some swing tunes. I began to feel energized, to be motivated again. He was a motivator, Howard was.

He booked a job in Dance Town USA, a joint I hadn't worked in years. Made a deal with them to call it the Johnny Bush Homecoming. Mayor Kathy Whitmire proclaimed April 21, 1988, "Johnny Bush Day" in Houston. We played Dance Town that night, and we had a packed house. Unbelievable. My old friend Bob Claypool gave me a real nice plug in the paper.

I had been convinced the crowds were terrible because people didn't want to hear my old songs anymore. But just like every Texan, I guess, I had grown up listening to Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. He was a household word. Every one of them old joints in Kashmere Gardens had a jukebox, and I remember walking down Humble Road from my buddy's house and I could hear Bob Wills playing "Still Water Runs the Deepest" coming out of those joints.

So I thought, "Why not go back and try to pick up where Bob Wills left off in the thirties?"

After World War II, Bob never had a big band again. He carried one or two horns at most. But before the war he had a full horn section with brass and woodwinds that would equal Harry James or any of them big band guys. In fact, some of them same musicians wound up working for Bob.

In the fifties Hank Thompson had a big swing band with three fiddles and two steels, but only one horn, a trumpet. In the seventies, Asleep at the Wheel played western swing and boogie-woogie with one horn, a sax. George Strait has always done Bob Wills's tunes in his live shows, but he's never had horns. Not that I've seen. Nobody in country

music has ever tried to do what Bob Wills did in the late thirties and early forties.

I thought, "I'll get a sax, a trombone, get two trumpets." I knew nothing about horns, but I knew this guy from Dallas named Johnny Gross who played steel. He was also a music major and could write charts for horns.

We had a rehearsal one day in the family room of my house, where the garage had been before Ben Dorcy drove through the wall.

I had Howard's band on this side of the room. Johnny Gross brought over some arrangements he had written for me and brought the horn players. And it was like having people from foreign countries meeting for the first time. It was like they were from different cultures and spoke different languages. Horn men were over here. Country guys were over there. It reminded me of Willie's first picnic when he brought the hippie and the redneck together.

I put on Buddy Emmons's *Swing Shift* album, which was a one-time fusion of big-band horns with steel guitar and fiddle, produced by Ray Pennington. I said, "This is what we're gonna shoot for."

Well, they started playing. It gelled right away. I knew we were on the right track.

Pretty soon the guys became friends. There was no musical snobbery anymore. We started hanging around together, and the trumpet player said, "You don't have to pay Johnny Gross to write these arrangements anymore. We'll be glad to do that. Just tell us what song you want, and we'll write the charts for it."

We had horn arrangements that I really liked for "In the Mood," "String of Pearls," "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "Raindrops Falling in a River." And then they started adding a little twist to my songs like "Undo the Right" and "What a Way to Live."

It was kind of an overwhelming thing. We had our own sound and lights. We'd walk in to these country joints that were used to four- or five-piece bands with thirteen guys, all wearing bib shirts with the state of Texas on it. We'd have to augment the size of the stage most of the time. I felt like we had to go all out, you know? Win, lose, or draw—it was a gamble.

I thought this was the answer. I thought there was an audience of people that had never heard this music before. What's not to like about it? I thought people would go nuts over it, and the price would go up.

Well, club owners liked it, but they didn't want to pay for it. We finally got my price back up to $2,500, where it had been in the early

Western swing: Johnny Bush and the Bandoleros Big Band. Waco, Texas, 1989.

'80s, before the decline. But my God, I was paying eleven to thirteen guys. We needed three vehicles, ten motel rooms, two roadies, and a soundman. Twenty-five hundred was just the break-even point.

AFTER A COUPLE OF YEARS, the band was sounding really good. I thought, "Now is the time to cut another album."

My last album had come out in 1985 on an independent Nashville label, Step One, which was run by my former producer at RCA, Ray Pennington. The album was a duet project with my old Cherokee Cowboy compadre, Darryl McCall, called *Hot Texas Country*.

I had started working with voice coach Gary Catona by that time, and I felt like my singing was better than on the two previous albums, which were painful for me to listen to. Darryl and I have similar styles, rooted in Ray Price, and we played off of one another easily. I thought it was a good album. But it remained a well-kept secret due to the lack of promotion that's always a problem with an independent label.

I wasn't expecting a mainstream radio hit with the swing band.

I knew I was doing something totally different from what was being done anywhere at that time. I thought a good album would open some doors and help build the audience.

We recorded it at Willie's Pedernales Studio, outside of Austin. I got Hank Thompson to sing with me on "Don't Sing Me No Songs about Texas," written by Merle Haggard and Leona Williams. I also got Willie to sing with me on one track, Tommy Duncan's "Time Changes Everything," originally recorded with the Texas Playboys. There was one instrumental, a big-band chart on Count Basie's "The Jersey Bounce."

Willie flipped over the album, absolutely flipped over it. He said, "What kind of dream did you have?" I said, "Well, I had to make a change. I had to do something."

We had laid down all the tracks and overdubbed all the vocals. I was getting ready to go in and do the final mix when the IRS came down on Willie like a ton of bricks for back taxes and penalties they said he owed—millions of dollars, tens of millions. Something about disallowing deductions his accountants had taken for him. It made the national news.

The feds seized everything of Willie's they could get their hands on, including Pedernales Studio and every reel of tape inside, whether it was recorded by Willie or not. That included my big-band tapes.

I finally got an attorney to write a letter to petition for the return of the tapes, and we finally got a response from the IRS: "You can come to Austin and pick up your tape." I had a time set up. I wanted to inspect the tapes before I accepted them, for two reasons: first, I wanted to make sure they were my tapes, and if they were my tapes, I wanted to make sure they weren't damaged.

I had a TV station in San Antonio contact a TV station in Austin, and they had a camera crew there when I showed up at the IRS warehouse. We met three or four IRS agents, and they had a stack of tapes. And this female agent was standing there with her hand on them, between me and the tapes. She had a piece of paper, and she said, "Sign this and these are yours."

The release form said something to the effect of, "I, so and so, do hereby acknowledge that these tapes are in the same condition that they were in when they were seized."

I said, "Wait a minute. All I see is boxes. How do I know there's tapes in them? Once I sign that paper, it's over. I've got a studio set up nearby, and we'll go over there and we'll play 'em. Then I'll sign."

She said, "No, you don't understand—you're not touching them."

I started to get mad. I told her, "Well, I see boxes there, but I don't even know that there's tapes in them. And if there are tapes, how do I know they're mine. And if they're mine, how am I gonna know they're not damaged unless we inspect them. Get them too close to a magnet or to heat or anything, and they're ruined."

She said, "I'm not getting through to you, am I? You sign this release and you can go through them all you want to."

Well, I had my attorney with me, and the camera crew was there getting all this documented. We left, and they showed it that day on the five o'clock news.

My gripe was, "Here's my government, who I'm paying taxes to, putting me out of business." Tying my hands so I can't make a living. I didn't personally owe the IRS any money. In fact, I had a credit at the time. I was pissed, to say the least.

The IRS was gonna sell my recordings and all the other tapes for the price of blank tapes! Haggard, who also had a recording at Pedernales in the can, let 'em sell his. He said, "I ain't messing with them." I said, "By God, I am."

However, I finally signed the release without listening to the tapes. Fortunately, they were the right tapes and there was no damage.

We're talking about two years of being left in limbo here. I couldn't work on it, I couldn't sell it, I couldn't have leased it.

I decided to put the album out myself. I called it *Time Changes Everything*. I sold it at my gigs and in selected record stores, such as the Ernest Tubb Record Store in Nashville, and Cactus Music in Houston.

I loved that album. Still do. It didn't fit what was going on in the music business at that time, but what have I ever done that did? My records in the '60s were totally different from most of what was going on in Nashville. I was the only one using fiddles. But the radio liked it. That's how things evolve. To be different used to be what made hits. When Presley came out, he was so different from what others were doing, some stations wouldn't play him, but look how many did.

WE HAD THE BIG BAND for about five years, from about 1988 to 1993. I was lucky to make enough money just to pay everybody. I personally didn't make a dime of profit. It wasn't like a decision where I called everybody together and said, "It's over," like I'd done with the previous band. Lynda and I just started booking singles, or booking dates with a five-piece band.

But I'm not sorry I did it. It was good music, and it made going to work fun again. It gave me a five-year break from the old routine. And something happened during those five years: people began to want to hear "Green Snakes on the Ceiling" and "Whiskey River" and "Undo the Right" and some of my other older stuff again. The crowds were coming back.

What I discovered was that in addition to my old fans, there was a whole new younger audience out there that liked traditional country. You didn't have to tell them who Ray Price or Ernest Tubb were, or why people danced counterclockwise in a beer joint, or what a shuffle beat was. They already knew.

Part of this might have had to do with the change that mainstream country music went through in the mid-1980s, with the coming of the so-called new traditionalists.

I really liked what George Strait was doing. It wasn't Nashville-type country and it wasn't Texas swing; it was a little bit of both. He even cut "Right or Wrong," an old Bob Wills tune originally recorded in the twenties. To this day, young kids think that's a George Strait song. I was playing that song with the Western Downbeats and the Texas Top Hands when George Strait was just a little buckaroo.

Ricky Skaggs cut an old Ray Price tune, "New Heartache." He won a big CMA award that same year. And Randy Travis, I thought, was real country and traditional. He reminded me of a cross between George Jones and Lefty Frizzell. I didn't like everything he did, but I liked "Diggin' Up Bones." One of these days, I'm gonna record that tune.

I think those guys were the saviors of country music, because there was a lot of crap coming out around that time. For example, Kenny Rogers. Not anything personal at Kenny, but I didn't like the songs and I didn't like the way he sang. But a lot of people did, and that scared me. There was nothing there to listen to. No songs, no voice, no soul. And the arrangements all sounded the same, like piped-in elevator music. It was so disheartening. That's when I quit listening to the radio.

So I was happy to hear some young traditional country talent coming up. But the arrival of the next generation turned out to be a mixed blessing, because country radio quit playing all the artists from my generation.

Back in the '80s you might have to put up with Kenny Rogers and a whole bunch of others whose names I can't even remember now. But you could still hear Willie and Waylon, Haggard and Jones, on the radio as well.

All of a sudden, if you weren't young and pretty, you were out. This Nashville producer said—it came out in the *Nashville Banner*, I think—"We don't care what they sound like or how good they write; show me what they look like." If the industry had thought like that forty or fifty years ago, we would never have heard Bob Wills or Ernest Tubb or Hank Snow or Marty Robbins. Or Willie Nelson. Or Johnny Bush.

ONE TIME IN THE EARLY '80S, a couple introduced themselves to me after a dance in New Braunfels. It was Norma Strait and her husband, George. Norma said she's always been a big fan, and George said, "I've always loved your singing." And I told him I loved what he was doing. His career was just taking off then.

He came out on the bus, and we talked about playing some golf together some time. Months went by before we met again at a show in Boerne, Texas. By this time, Strait is really climbing the ladder. He's still living in San Marcos, between San Antonio and Austin, so we make an appointment to play at a country club there. We go over there, and he's got this little old bag of clubs, like anybody would have. We walk over to the door, and he very timidly says, "We need a golf cart and eighteen holes." And they tell us it'll be two or three hours before we can get a tee time.

I'm thinking, "This guy doesn't have any clout." I said, "Hell, let's go to Willie's. We can be there in forty-five minutes and it won't cost us nothing."

He says, "You mean Willie Nelson's place?" I said, "Yeah."

So we take off. We go to the first tee of Willie's golf course out at Pedernales, outside of Austin. Willie wasn't there, but Coach Royal, the former football coach at UT and a good friend of Willie's, was just teeing off, along with pro golfer Ben Crenshaw and three or four other guys I didn't know. They had about eight people in their foursome, which is typical for Willie's course.

We walked up to them, and I introduced George all around. I said, "Coach Royal, this is George Strait." Coach never smiled or anything. Pulls out his car keys and throws them at George. "Go get us some beer," he says.

I don't think he was joking. There is only one superstar on that hill, and he wasn't there that day.

Well, we had a big day. Everybody enjoyed being at Willie's. After I dropped George off back in San Marcos, I realized he had left his little

bag of clubs in my car. They laid around my garage for months. Friends of mine would bring young kids over to my house to stare at George Strait's golf clubs.

That day at Willie's, Strait caught me looking at him. The reason I was staring was that I was trying to figure out what this big growing appeal was. Why were these girls going apeshit over this skinny kid with the big ears that looked like a taxicab with both doors open.

Finally, he must have become aware of it, because he turned around at one point and said, "I don't know. Okay? I don't know."

By the early 1990s the trend in Nashville had swung back to pop, with Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. It seemed like Nashville was doing everything in its power to kill country roots. It was as bad or worse than it was in the early '80s, and it still is.

What's happened to country music? Damn, what happened to the music? I cringe when I listen to the radio. The beat to me sounds like the same rhythm section on every record. And the singers look and sound so much alike. But they're wearing cowboy hats, so that makes them country, I guess.

I think what has suffered most in these new trends in country music is the songs. You know, good songs are not being recorded because they might be considered politically incorrect. There's too many "don'ts." You can't address this issue. You can't sing about that. Drinking songs, cheating songs, and crying-in-your-beer songs are all but extinct.

Damn, if we thought the Opry was strict, it was nothing compared to today's standards that are set by the people in charge of the recording industry. You can't say anything negative about a woman anymore or about being unfaithful. But you can't be too faithful, either; you can't mention God. But you can sing about how great your truck is or how much you love your tractor.

It's gotten to the point where you can't say anything on a record unless it's upbeat, where everything is great, everybody is happy, everybody's fine. And that's not life. When I watched the last CMA awards show, I was not familiar with one song that won an award. People will say, "Well, that's because you don't listen to it." They're right. I don't listen to it. I can't listen to it. I just can't.

It seems like the people who like those songs would rather listen to a recording than a live band anyway. It's like back in the early days

of honky-tonks, except instead of a jukebox, you've now got a deejay in a booth, and the dance halls are spending thousands on lighting and stages. I heard about one place that spent seven million dollars. I've talked to a lot of successful club owners who tell me that they would never get their money back. But they have the Vegas-style lighting and the Vegas-style stage.

I've done a few shows in these types of places; it's not worth it. The people there are more interested in getting their picture taken on the mechanical bull than in me and the band trying to play dance music. The club deejays want you to cut your set short so they can play their stupid crappy records.

I'd rather play the honky-tonks. They may be upholstered toilets, but at least the people in them know the real deal when they hear it. Playing dance halls has kept my career alive.

In addition to festivals and county fairs and rodeos, I still have a circuit of honky-tonks and dance halls that I play semiregularly. Not surprisingly, almost all of them are in Texas: the Stage Coach Ballroom in Fort Worth, the Cabaret Club in Bandera, the Stardust in Odessa, the Hall of Fame in Bryan, the Tin Star in Giddings, Floore's Country Store in Helotes, Gruene Hall in New Braunfels, Blaine's and the River Stage in San Angelo, No Whar But Texas in Corpus, Tin Hall and Blanco's in Houston, the Caravan in Amarillo, City Limits in Stephenville, the Lakeside Tavern in Waco, London Hall in London, Texas, Schroeder Hall in Victoria, The Stage Coach in Stamford, the Villa Inn in Lubbock, the Ponderosa in Abilene, the Cotton Club in Granger, and, last but not least, the grand toilet of them all, the Broken Spoke in Austin.

There's not as many of these joints as there used to be, and they're smaller than they used to be, but these places are still booking real traditional country music.

Ray Price is back playing the honky-tonks now. But he has a no-smoking clause in his contract. I don't like cigarette smoke either, but when I go into a club, a joint, or a dance hall where people are drinking and having a good time, I'm not going to tell them they can't smoke. It's just part of it.

One thing I will say, there's less fighting now. I can't remember the last time I saw a fight. I told you what honky-tonks were like when I was coming up, with all the fights and carrying on. In the '60s and '70s there was a guy in Lubbock named James Whit. He owned a club, and Willie and I worked for him. Everything depended on the mood he was in. If he didn't like what an act was doing, or if they were five minutes

late, or for any other reason that happened to piss him off, he would say, "I'm not paying you. If you don't like it, step outside."

Well, the guy was as big as the side of a house. But one night, one of his employees got into it with James over two or three dollars or something. James threatened him like he had done everybody else all of his life. But that man went outside, opened up the trunk of his car, got his double-barrel shotgun, and blew James Whit away, right there in his own club.

The next time I got a call from Lubbock was from James's wife. She started booking me, and business went on as usual.

During my peak years, in the late '60s and early '70s, I probably grossed a total of about $200,000 a year, all from live gigs. Doesn't sound like a lot compared to today's stars, does it? Some of them can make that much in one night playing the Astrodome or someplace like that.

BY THE EARLY NINETIES, I was singing much better than I had been ten years earlier, thanks mostly to the vocal exercises that Gary Catona had shown me and lowering my keys.

One day I got a call from a doctor friend of mine. He said, "Johnny, I just saw something on the medical channel about spasmodic dysphonia. They didn't find a cure, but they've found a way to fix the symptoms for about ninety days at a time, and you can talk normally."

And I said, "Thank you, God."

I got a tape of the program. It was a before-and-after demonstration. There was a woman on it speaking with spasmodic dysphonia. Just exactly like me. First time I ever heard somebody that talks like me. After she'd received some treatment, she spoke again and I said, "Is that the same girl?!"

They'd given her an injection of Botox.

Botox is very trendy and all the rage now, thanks to its use in cosmetic surgery. But back then it was very scary stuff.

Botox is botulism poison, the same kind of food poisoning that kills people. It attacks the nervous system kind of like rattlesnake venom and paralyzes the respiratory system: you quit breathing and die. The doctor told me that a spoonful of this shit in the water supply of San Antonio would kill every human in town.

A spoonful. And now they wanted to inject it into my body? As bad as I wanted to get well, I had to ponder that for a while.

What they did at the time, they went in through your nose and down your throat with this fiber-optic camera until they could see your vocal cords. Then another doctor with a hypodermic needle went right through the voice-box cartilage into the larynx while the first guy watched the picture. That guy can see the needle and guide it to the proper nerve, and they give a shot of Botox to that nerve.

It's just a very minute amount, and it paralyzes that nerve so that when you go to speak, there's no more seizing up, because that nerve is paralyzed just enough to alleviate the spasms.

I went to see Dr. Richard Newman in San Antonio. He's a member of my church, and he became my ENT doctor. He said, "I want you to go see George Gates." You remember Dr. Gates, who had me doing speech therapy at the University of Texas a long time back? Richard Newman said, "He's at the Washington University Medical Center in St. Louis now."

So I went and spent three days in St. Louis. Dr. Gates said, "Now here's what's going to happen: you're going to lose your voice completely at first, and after about three days, it'll be real breathy. But slowly it'll come back. Don't worry if your voice is breathy, and don't worry if it doesn't work. But if it does work, you'll have to come back every ninety days for another injection."

I said, "Shit, yeah. Get it on. Let's try it." They examined me, went down my throat, found the spot, and hit it. In less than thirty-six hours I began to speak in a whisper.

My speaking voice came back, and I got some relief. I couldn't feel the spasms as badly. But here's the rub: I couldn't sing a lick. And I had lots of jobs booked.

Here's what they didn't know or didn't tell me: your vocal cords come together in the larynx. When you breathe, they open like a triangle to allow the air down your trachea and into your lungs. When you exhale or try to speak, they come together, and a little column of air vibrates the cords, like guitar strings. That's how you phonate. But if you go higher—if you sing—those cords stretch, like a balloon. But after the Botox treatment, the stretch is gone. I tried to sing low and high, but it was gone.

I thought, "This ain't going to happen. This ain't working." I called Dr. Gates and said, "George, this ain't going to work on a singer, pal."

I was devastated. Not only had the treatment not worked, I was out of work. For ninety days, I had to cancel all my gigs and wait it out.

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14

PLEASE TALK TO MY HEART

If you say once more that it's over
Don't worry because I'll be blue
You hurt me before but can't anymore
I'm hurting, that's why I need you

—"PLEASE TALK TO MY HEART," WRITTEN BY COUNTRY JOHNNY MATHIS AND JIMMY FOUTHEREE, RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

Is there a difference between Texas country music and Nashville country music? I think there definitely is today.

To me, the term "Texas Music" implies Bob Wills, Floyd Tillman, Ernest Tubb, Hank Thompson, Lefty Frizzell, George Jones, and Ray Price. And Willie Nelson. And Johnny Bush. To me, that's Texas music.

To me, Nashville music today implies bad rock and roll in a cowboy hat.

Although I recorded in Nashville, I always focused on appealing first to the Texas market. There's something a Texan can put in his music that's identifiable to another Texan, and I don't know why that is.

Why wasn't bluegrass ever big in Texas? When we were listening to Bill Monroe at night on the Opry, my kinfolks would be sitting around an old battery radio and spitting in the fire. But when Ernest Tubb would sing, you knew he was the hero.

Everybody loved Bill Monroe and Roy Acuff. But Texas is dancing and honky-tonks. Nobody danced at the Opry except across the alley in Tootsie's Orchid Lounge. People like Bob Wills were so popular here because they catered to dancers. So did Ray Price, and so do I. I always had the beat, the dance beat.

Willie doesn't cater to dancers. But Willie is Texas music too. He's singing stories. When other people, including me, have sung his songs, people dance to them. But there's something about Willie that makes people want to stop and listen.

As I told you before, when I was fronting his band, I would get the crowd on the dance floor, then invite them to come up close to the stage to listen to Willie sing. I wish they'd do that for me sometimes. I'm still playing dances, and I'm glad that I am, but I would welcome the opportunity to do more shows so that people can listen to the lyrics.

I am working on the final mix of my first acoustic album, which should be out by the time you read this. The album is titled *Devil's Disciple*, for the first good song I ever wrote. The album represents a complete departure from anything I've done in the past. The material consists of story-type songs, including some of mine, some of Willie's, and other old standards I've known and loved for years. My voice is in a lower, mellower register now, which suits this material.

BUT BACK IN THE EARLY NINETIES I thought *Time Changes Everything* might be my last recording. I didn't have any desire to do another one right away. I knew airplay was not in the cards, and I thought that if I were to cut anything else and couldn't get it played, what would be the point? In the old days, you could find you a good tune, go to Nashville, record it, put it out, and get on the radio. But we're in a new era, where the mainstream is not playing my kind of music now.

I had obtained the rights to compile a couple of CD and cassette collections of my greatest hits on Stop and RCA, and I also had CDs

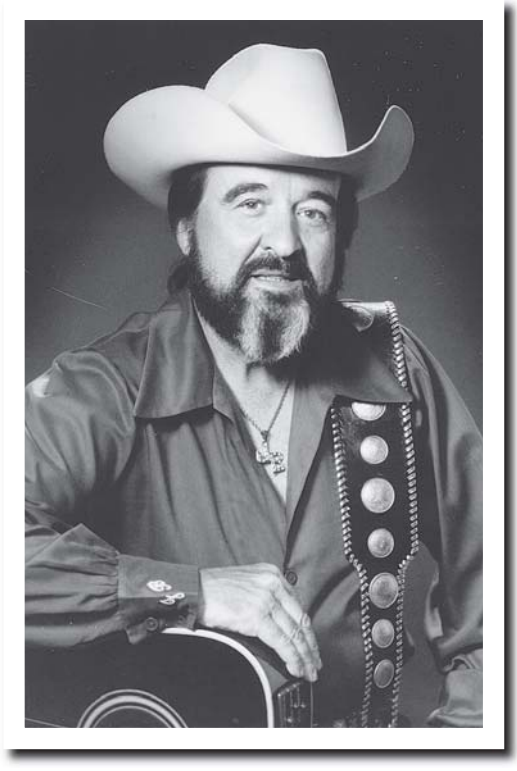
and tapes of my first album, *Sound of a Heartache*. I could sell them off the bandstand at shows. If I never recorded anything else, I was content with doing that.

Then, in the mid-nineties I started hearing about a new radio format called Americana that was playing traditional country along with a whole new generation of Texas country singer-songwriters that I was just starting to become aware of. These artists sold records and built their audience the same way I did—by playing live.

Junior Pruneda, Ernest Tubb's old bass player, and Dow Daggett, my old buddy from the Western Downbeats, asked me, "Have you heard of Robert Earl Keen?" I'd seen his posters at Floore's Country Store in Helotes. He'd grown up in Houston, moved to Nashville, and come home to Texas, just like Willie and I had done a couple of decades earlier. He lived in Bandera, and he played at the Cabaret Club, my old stomping grounds, until he got too big for that size of venue.

I said, "Well, I've seen the posters."

Junior and Dow told me they had opened for him on a weekday



Johnny Bush publicity photo, 1995.

afternoon in the drizzling rain in the fall, and they said, "You're not gonna believe it—the guy can draw! He had about 2,000 people. And every one of them kids had come to see *him* and were singing the lyrics with him."

And I said, "What does he sound like?" And they said, "Nobody we've ever heard; anybody in the crowd can sing as good as he can." I said, "Well, what's the attraction?" They said they didn't have a clue.

Evidently, it's his songs. It's always the songs. People like Robert Earl Keen, and brothers Bruce and Charlie Robison, and the Dixie Chicks, and Pat Green are all writing songs with a Texas perspective for a Texas audience. It gives them an identity, lets them stand apart. It's sort of an underground country music scene that has nothing to do with Nashville or the big record companies or mainstream radio.

In a way, it's like the second coming of the outlaw country–redneck rock movement that Willie and Waylon and Jerry Jeff Walker had started in the '70s.

Some of what I hear the younger Texas artists doing, I like. I have to admit that I don't hear the classic genius of a Willie Nelson or a Harlan Howard or a Hank Cochran. But the more I listen, the more I like the new Texas music better than the New Country in Nashville. I hear very few great songs coming out of Nashville anymore. I heard Randy Travis's version of "Three Wooden Crosses" after A. J. Lockett at Ernest Tubb's Record Shop in Fort Worth sent me the CD and said, "You need to listen to this." I recorded it the next day. Unfortunately, that's a rare exception. Most of what I hear on the radio is crap.

Junior Brown played Floore's one time back in the mid-nineties. He was opening for the Mavericks. Junior called and invited me, and I went out to see him. When we got out there, some of these big guns at the country radio stations in town were there. Nobody knows what a radio personality looks like, and some of them have big egos. I mean, God almighty.

So anyway, Junior Brown goes on, destroys the audience, and comes back for two encores. I sat on Junior's bus, and we talked. We become pretty good friends. (I later played drums with his band in Austin a few times while he was between regular drummers.)

The next day, I called one of the two big radio stations here in town, and I said, "Are you playing Junior Brown?" They said, "Uh, no, we're not." These deejays on these big country stations are nice on the air, but if they are speaking to you one on one, they can be assholes. I didn't tell him who I was. They said, "He has a cult following." Click.

So I called the other station. They said, "We played him for a while. 'Highway Patrol.' Got no action on it." That's bullshit. They're not looking for action. They play what's on the playlist: punch a button and that's it. A chimpanzee could do the same thing. I called Wiley Alexander, who at that time was the music critic for the *San Antonio Express-News*, and told him what I had done. He called the stations, and they told him essentially the same thing they'd told me. So he wrote a big column on it, criticizing the mainstream country stations for not being real.

You also don't hear Pat Green on mainstream country radio. But right now Pat Green is the hottest thing in Texas music this side of George Strait and the Dixie Chicks. I worked a show with Pat two years ago in San Angelo, and it was great.

One of the guys playing with me on that gig had worked with Rick Treviño, and he said, "Johnny, I want you to be prepared. We worked with Pat Green when I was with Rick Treviño, and the audience was very rude to us."

And I said, "How do you mean?" And he said, "They'll drown you out chanting 'Pat-Fuckin'-Green!' 'Pat-Fuckin'-Green!'"

He said, "You get 2,000 kids chanting that, and it'll demoralize you." I said, "Well, you know, I'll take my chances."

I got some of that treatment when I opened for George Strait in the early nineties. I'll never do that again. That does not help your career. That is a setback, opening for George, 'cause those kids hate you so bad for keeping them from Strait that it does you more harm than good.

Well, with Pat it was the opposite. It was like working a Willie crowd, where they love you and are nice to you. After I got halfway through my show, a bunch of kids started hollering "Johnny-Fuckin'-Bush!" I know they were drunk, but I loved it! My God, these kids were the same age as my granddaughter at Texas A&M. She's never yelled "Johnny-Fuckin'-Bush," at least not where I could hear it.

Before the show, Pat came out on my bus, brought his guitar, and sang a few songs. He wanted to meet me, I guess, out of respect for the music that I had created years before. And I was anxious to meet him because I wanted to learn more about this new Texas music movement. He told me he and Cory Morrow started out playing guitar pulls at a guy's apartment in Lubbock when they was at Texas Tech. They were playing for tips. It started as a grassroots thing. Now he's playing The Woodlands Pavilion outside Houston and got his own picnic, like Willie and Robert Earl Keen.

I still can't tell you what Pat Green's music sounds like, because the noise of the crowd drowned it out. That was a fun bunch.

Clay Blaker is a great songwriter who has written a bunch of hits for George Strait. He kind of went from traditional country into this new Texas thing. I have a lot of respect for Clay as an entertainer and as a writer, and I've recorded some of his songs.

I was having dinner at his house in New Braunfels one night, and I embarrassed myself. Bob Dylan was brought up in the conversation, and I said that I didn't like his singing at all. And Clay got real quiet for a minute, and he stared across the table at me. He said, "Well, he likes your singing a lot."

I said, "Bob Dylan wouldn't know me from a hole in the ground." And Clay said, "When he comes to town, his boys call me and the first thing they ask me is, 'Where can we go buy Johnny Bush records?'"

Clay said Bob Dylan is a huge Johnny Bush fan. Well, then I felt like an asshole for saying what I did.

So I've learned to keep an open mind and/or a closed mouth. But back in the mid-nineties, I couldn't see how this new Texas music audience had much to do with my kind of Texas music—Bob Wills, ET, Lefty. When the radio quit playing my generation of artists, I figured it was over for us.

It took a couple of younger Austin-based guys named Dale Watson and Cornell Hurd to open up my mind, just as Willie had to convince me to think more positively back in the '60s. In asking me to sing on their albums, they convinced me there were people out there that still wanted to hear my music and would buy it. They were real good friends to me, and big influences in getting me started back, and for that I am grateful to them.

When Dale and Cornell told me there were people out there who wanted to hear what I had to say, they didn't mean the older, traditional honky-tonk audiences that had always come to see me. They meant an audience that I wasn't aware of, the people that were coming to see *them*, the younger generation and the college kids. Apparently, the new Texas music movement has a traditional country wing as well as a country-rock wing. They said they were getting requests to do my songs such as "Green Snakes on the Ceiling" and "Whiskey River" from the younger listeners. That's what they would tell me. It was good to hear.

*Austin alt-country: Johnny Bush (*right*) with Junior Brown (*left*) and Cornell Hurd (*center*). Continental Club, Austin, Texas, circa 1997.*

I cut a duet with Dale called "That's What I Like about Texas" that was released on his second Hightone album, *Blessed or Damned*, in the mid-nineties. He's a hell of a singer, like a young Haggard. But he also reminds me a lot of what Willie has going for him, with the way his singing and guitar playing complement each other. That live album on Audium that he done in London is one of the best live country albums I've ever heard.

Shortly before I recorded with Dale, I'd been introduced to Cornell Hurd at the recording session for Willie's *Me and the Drummer* album at Pedernales Studio. (By the way, this was the first time I'd played drums in a recording studio in thirty years.) Floyd Domino, the pianist with Asleep at the Wheel and many others, introduced us by saying, "This guy's always been a fan of yours." It turns out that Cornell and Ray Benson (of Asleep at the Wheel) had come out to see me in San Jose, California, back in the early seventies when "Whiskey River" was hot. That was when I was trying to cover up my throat problem, and I wasn't happy with my performance at all. They said they were just knocked out.

Cornell arrived in Austin a few years after Ray. He'd left California and gone to Florida with Paul Skelton and a few other band members. He found some of my old albums at a garage sale and told Paul,

"This is what it's all about. We're going to Texas." He continues to lead one of the most underrated country bands in the state, in my opinion.

Cornell gets pissed off when I tell him this because he wants to be taken seriously as a musician, but he is the David Letterman of country music. He's a fan of mine, he loves Ernest Tubb and Hank Thompson and Ray Price. His band plays shuffles right, and they swing. But his schtick is entirely different from what his heroes were doing. They didn't have any schtick. He's entertaining as hell. He's *funny*. Look at the titles of his albums—*Cool and Unusual Punishment*, *A Stagecoach Named Desire*, *Texas Fruit Shack*. When I first took his albums home and listened to them, I was thinking, "Where *is* he coming from?" I loved the music, but I didn't hear *me* in it. I can hear my influence in the shuffle rhythms that his band plays so well, but I have never written a lyric like, "I am standing here holding the genitalia of a fool."

Cornell puts on the most entertaining show you're gonna see in Austin. I'd buy a ticket to see it. I've had at least one track on all of his studio albums since we met. We've done some duets on my songs, and I recorded his song "Home to Texas" on one of my albums.

DALE AND CORNELL encouraged me to record again by having me on their albums. I thought, "If they think I can help their albums, then maybe I can help my own."

I recorded my so-called comeback album, *Talk to My Heart*, using a combination of some of my old Bandolero band and friends from that era along with some of the younger Austin-based musicians. Tommy Hill, my old friend in Nashville who'd worked with Pete Drake on my Stop albums, came down to produce it. I didn't have a record deal. I was financing it out of my own pocket. I got by as cheaply as I could by telling the guys, "This is what it pays. I'll give you $300 to do this album. It might take two days."

I cut it live. If I'd gone to Nashville, there's no way I could have done it like that.

The album is sort of a mixture of old and new. The title track, "Please Talk to My Heart," was a Ray Price hit back in the sixties. I've tried to record one of the old Ray Price hits at every session because I believe those songs should stay alive. Up until recently he wasn't doing them anymore.

Justin Treviño is an amazing young vocalist and bass player who has become a good friend. He's also a great songwriter, and he contrib-

uted "Neon Nightmare" and "The Least I Can Do Is Try" to the album. (Justin plays with my band and sits in with Cornell Hurd a lot.) Clay Blaker came up with two good ballads, "Any Fool Can See" and "This House Has No Doors." Whitey Shafer wrote "The Bottle, Your Memory and Me."

I also try to include one of Willie's songs on almost every one of my albums. In this case it was "A Moment Isn't Very Long," which I'd first recorded on the *Sound of a Heartache* album. Then I'd done it as a ballad; this time I did as a 4/4 shuffle. I wrote "The Cheatin' Line" and "It Sure Feels Good (Not to Feel So Bad)." If I do say so, "The Cheatin' Line" is one of the best lyrics I've ever written:

> When did you cross the cheatin' line?
> How long did it take to drive me out of your mind?
> Temptation's evil lure is the Devil's wine
> That keeps flowing just a two-step
> Across the cheatin' line

Every one of those songs could be an A-side hit single as far as I'm concerned. Back in the sixties, they would have been.

I still had my vocal condition to contend with, of course. I was still doing the opera exercises that Gary Catona had shown me. And I would take cortisone before the sessions to keep the swelling of my vocal cords down.

The album was recorded in April of 1996 and released almost two years later on Watermelon Records, an independent Austin-based label. Unlike when I was having hits in the 1960s and '70s, I no longer had to go all over the country to promote a new album. I could make so much money just playing in Texas that I could make a living within the state. Which was a good thing—I couldn't afford to go out on the road without label support, and I had never had label support. Why should I go to Chicago to make $450 when I could go to Houston and make $2,500?

Today when a major label signs these new hat acts, the first thing they'll do is hire a marketing firm, then they'll lease buses and put a band together, they'll hire a sound company, they'll book the guy on tour. And they'll pick up the tab—but this all goes on the right column of the ledger, against him. And after his career starts ebbing a little bit, they drop his ass and go with somebody else. And he may wind up owing his label hundreds of thousands of dollars—or even millions—and never seeing a cent, no matter how many records he sells.

Even so, I had the same old troubles with Watermelon that I did with all my other labels. I bet I sold more copies of *Talk to My Heart* off the bandstand at my shows than the label did at retail stores. I never saw it in Wal-Mart or places like that. So what good would it have done me to go out on tour nationally?

But even so, it felt great to finally have a new album, and I was happy with the way it turned out. I liked the sound. I was real happy with it. I wasn't happy that you couldn't buy the product and that you couldn't get it played on the mainstream stations, but I got great reviews on it. The *New York Times*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Playboy*, and several publications on the West Coast all raved about it.

Talk to My Heart was an ironic choice, as it turned out, for an album title, since it came out the same year, 1998, that I went into the hospital for triple-bypass heart surgery.

We played the Gatorfest in Anahuac, a little town between Houston and Beaumont, and I remember that night being real hot and muggy. I was exceptionally tired after my show. *Real* tired. Going from the autograph table back to the bus, I was just dragging my ass.

I thought, "I shouldn't be this tired." But I weighed about 225 pounds then. (I weigh 180 now.) Still, there was no pain, no dizziness, no shortness of breath; I was just tired.

The next day I felt this burning sensation in the back of my arms, burning like a hot iron. I thought, "That's really strange." And then it was in my throat, and I thought, "I know what that is—it's acid reflux." I took a big slug of Maalox, sat down, and it went away.

A couple of days later I was out pushing a lawnmower. Same thing happened. Only this time that hot pain radiated down my arms and upside my neck and in my throat again.

After that happened two or three times, I called my regular internist, and he sent me to a cardiologist to have a thallium stress test done. The pictures came back and they showed I had one, two, maybe three blocked arteries. An angioplasty confirmed that the arteries were clogged, and so I elected to have bypass surgery. I did not want to be off in West Texas somewhere and have a heart attack. The recovery time was eight weeks.

After my heart surgery, I seemed to regress vocally. Even though I had done what they told me to—watched my diet, lost weight—my

voice seemed to be getting worse and worse. I thought maybe they were right about psychological or physical trauma. This was both: psychological, because I'd had heart surgery, and physical, because they stop your heart, they take it out of your chest and work on it, and they stick it back in and hope they can get it started again. You have this whole feeling in your chest like a truck is running over you because your sternum is cut from stem to stern and they wire it back together.

Because of the trauma, the spasms got worse. I got to where I couldn't do the vocal exercises. And up to that point I thought I was talking pretty good. Now, I couldn't even breathe without hurting.

As soon as I was able, I went back to the Catona voice exercises. When I'd try it, my throat would seize up. I used to sit on a sofa in my den to do my exercises. The sofa is made out of big peeled pine logs. And where I would sit, at the end of the sofa, I clawed holes in the wooden leg of that sofa, scratching and tapping and straining, trying to get it going. I couldn't do it.

Once again, I thought, "That's it. It's over."

Actually, my singing wasn't that bad, but I could *not* talk. Absolutely couldn't do it.

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15

HOME TO TEXAS

There's 4.2 million people in these cities by the bay
And just one fool too many every minute that I stay
That's why I'm headed somewhere where I don't have to act
Like someone I can't be
That's why I'm going back
Home to Texas

—"HOME TO TEXAS," WRITTEN BY CORNELL HURD,
RECORDED BY JOHNNY BUSH

YOU DON'T KNOW what it's like to have been speech-impaired for so long. Can you imagine having all this conversation trapped inside you? To be at a party somewhere, the conversations would start, and I'd want to get into them. I'd have something to interject. And before I could get my motor going, the subject would change. And this was so frustrating. All this built up for years.

I was lucky enough to know someone who helped me deal with that frustration. Back when I'd had the first Botox shot, Dr. George Gates told me about a speech therapist at Southwest Texas State Uni-

versity in San Marcos named Anat Keidar. Anat Keidar is a speech therapist who, without being a medical doctor, probably knows more about spasmodic dysphonia than most medical doctors. I went over to see her, and she gave me some of the best advice I've ever got. She told me to quit hiding my affliction and try to help others who had the same thing.

Anat said, "'You've got to get out of the closet. You've got to get out and tell people about it and talk about it—'Yeah, I've got spasmodic dysphonia . . . Yeah, I can't talk.'"

And maybe she was right. Maybe the reason I have this is to help others. I have to think positively about this. There is a saying that you can't outgive God. Whatever you give, it comes back to you tenfold.

So I started going to parties again. I stopped hiding in the corner. And since then, with the help of my wife, Lynda, I've tried to help others who are suffering from this same affliction, even in those times when I could hardly speak myself.

Lynda and I have helped several people with speech disorders, but I've still never met another singer with SD. I wish there was one I could talk to. But only one in 35,000 people get this, so there's not that many singers apt to get it. I know there are some, but they are still in the closet, so to speak.

Lynda and Anat and my family and my band were all on hand when I traveled to Washington, D.C., in March of 2002 to accept the Annie Glenn Award from the National Council of Communicative Disorders.

The Annie Glenn Award is an achievement award for people with communicative disorders and who have triumphed in spite of that. It's named after the wife of former astronaut and U.S. Senator John Glenn. She was a stutterer and overcame it. Mrs. Glenn presented the award, and I was introduced to Senator Glenn, who was a very gracious guy.

My band played four tunes. They asked me if I would speak. They said, "Keep it under sixty seconds." And I thought it was a funny thing to ask a man who couldn't talk to give a speech, and then tell him to keep it short. Keeping it short was the easy part.

THE REGRESSION in my ability to speak after the heart surgery was maddening. I felt like I'd gone back to square one. If there was any consolation, it lay in the fact that audiences were coming back to the shows and I had a way to make records again.

Johnny Bush with Annie Glenn, receiving the Annie Glenn Award for people who have overcome communicative disorders. Washington D.C., 2002.

I had two albums released in 2000. One was the old *Time Changes Everything* tape, which I had originally put out myself after I finally got it back from the IRS. It was reissued as *Johnny Bush Sings Bob Wills*. It was a damned stupid title, since I only covered one Wills song, "Time Changes Everything," on the whole album. As I tried to explain to the label, the album was more a tribute to the big-band sound of the Texas Playboys than a tribute to Wills himself, but I was happy to have the album come out on a real record label.

The second release was a new album called *Lost Highway Saloon*. *Lost Highway Saloon* was in some ways a more conceptual album than *Talk to My Heart*. Or at least that's the way I conceived of it.

My old albums were always collections of potential hit singles. But since I wasn't getting any airplay, I decided to do something more ambitious, something that somebody who bought it would enjoy listening to all the way through as a complete piece of work. That was my aim.

A kid named Brian Burns sent me a CD of his music, which included a song he'd written called "Lost Highway Saloon," and it was exactly what the best of the new generation of Texas singer-songwriters were doing: songwriting, storytelling. Brian Burns is that kind of a storytelling artist. I put his CD on and lay down on the couch and went to sleep, and when that song came on, it woke me up. I guess it was that

old thing of waking something up in your mind. Well, it woke my ass up. And I listened to that thing all night long.

I included a Marty Robbins tune, "They're Hanging Me Tonight." Marty was one of my heroes. As I've said many times, you've either got to be a fool or have balls the size of an elephant to cover one of his tunes. But I wanted to do this one. I did with it two acoustic guitars and a bass. That's all.

There's another song on there, "You've Got 'Til Sundown," which is by Larry Kingston, who wrote my hit "Jim, Jack and Rose" back in the Stop days. A good title is very important. When I see "You've Got Till Sundown," it makes me want to hear the song. What the hell is it about? Is it about a gunfight? That is the intrigue of it. It turns out the guy is telling his memory it's got till sundown to get her out of his mind or he's going to start drinking until he passes out.

Tennessee Ernie Ford and Kay Starr had a country crossover hit with "I'll Never Be Free" back in the late '40s. I remember listening to it on the jukebox when I was a kid in Kashmere Gardens. I recut it as a duet with Kate McCarthy because she has that sultry voice like Kay Starr had.

Leon Payne, one of the most underrated songwriters ever to come out of Texas, wrote "Pride Goes before a Fall." Jim Reeves had the hit on it, but that was always a Leon Payne classic to me, right up there with "Lost Highway." "I'll Never Be Free" appears twice on the album, first in a conventional recording and again as a sort of hidden track at the end of the album that sounds like it's coming through an old 78 rpm record. I thought that was cool.

I also recorded a gospel song for the first time. It's called "Wine into Water," a gospel song by T. Graham Brown with a great lyric:

> You've heard a multitude of prayers on my behalf
> To pray one more won't be too much to ask
> I've tried to fight this battle by myself
> But it's a war that I can't win without your help
> 'Cause tonight I'm as low as any man can go
> I'm down and I can't fall much farther
> Once upon a time you turned the water into wine
> So tonight I'm begging to you, Father
> Will you help me turn this wine back into water.

It knocked me out.

Johnny Bush Sings Bob Wills and *Lost Highway Saloon* were released simultaneously on the new Lone Star/Texas Music Group label. The owners wanted to christen it with a Texas-style name.

I said, "How about Lone Star?" They said they'd love to have that, but somebody already had it.

I said, "I know who has it—Willie." In the early seventies Willie had started his own label, called Lone Star. He recorded a few things with Cooder Brown and Darryl McCall. He let the label go dormant, but he still owned the name.

So I called Willie, and I said, "We'd sure like to use that name." And he said, "Is that what *you* want?" I said "Yeah." And he said, "Well, go ahead and use it!"

I said to myself, "Well, I'm back in the traces, back in the harness. It's all coming back to me."

The people that heard *Lost Highway Saloon* loved it. But a lot more people didn't hear it. Same old story: album not available in stores. You cannot sell an album if it's not available. There's just no way. If you don't have money to promote the product, why put out a record? Because you're not going to be able to recoup your losses otherwise.

If I may say so, I really wish more people could hear this album. *Lost Highway Saloon* is my favorite of the "modern" honky-tonk albums I've released thus far, because of the songs and the way they fit together. I believe that one day this will be regarded as a classic, as *The Sound of a Heartache* is regarded as a classic by those who've heard it.

In 2001, I released another new album on Lone Star called *Green Snakes*. Like *Talk to My Heart* and *Lost Highway Saloon*, *Green Snakes* is a mix of old and new. The first 3,000 copies also included a bonus disc of the demo recording session I did with Willie and Tommy Morrell back in Fort Worth in 1963. This demo includes the original version of "Eye for an Eye," which Price recorded in 1965. I cut my own version on *Sound of a Heartache*.

Green Snakes, of course, refers to "Green Snakes on the Ceiling," the RCA hit which, after "Whiskey River," is my most-requested song, especially with the younger listeners. Except for lowering the key, we tried to do it identically to the original version on the new album. I had the same guitar player, Dave Kirby, who played on the original track. But I think with the technology today, it's a better-sounding record than the original.

The cut of "Drivin' Nails In My Coffin," written by Jerry Irby, is an older recording that dates from 1978. It was recorded at the old Columbia Studio B Quonset hut in Nashville. Tommy Allsup, who played with everybody from Buddy Holly to Waylon Jennings to Asleep At the Wheel, produced it. It's a swing tune, up-tempo. Floyd Tillman cut the original back in the late forties, one of the very few hits he had that he didn't write. I've told you how when I was a kid, Floyd would come over and visit with my uncle Jerry. They were buddies. Floyd and I remained friends up until his death. I remember a few years ago at a KNEL concert in Brady, Texas, Floyd tripped and fell over a monitor speaker as he was leaving the bandstand. Everybody was concerned that he was hurt because he was in his eighties. Floyd said, "No, I'm not hurt, and to prove it, I'll sing another song." He sang "Slippin' Around." I think that's hilarious.

The ballad "When Did You Stop Lovin' Me?" came to me in a roundabout way. Lynda and I went to see the movie *Pure Country*, the George Strait feature in which he played a burnt-out country singer getting back to his roots. The song, which was written by a kid named Monty Holmes, was played behind the scene in the background, and it just destroyed me. I couldn't enjoy the rest of the movie for trying to remember that lyric.

If you'll notice, I've got slow ballads and up-tempo tunes next to one another. I think it makes for better listening if you're working around your house or driving in your car. It makes a better mixture. I don't like to do two slow ones back-to-back.

I've got a Moon Mullican song, "Pipeliner Blues," which is sort of a double entendre swing-hillbilly-pop number. I think it's instructive to reprise here what I wrote regarding "Pipeliner Blues" in the liner notes. It illustrates, I think, the way musicians—especially musicians in Texas—used to mix influences and tear down the artificial boundaries that seem to separate everything these days. Back in those days, the mixture was an organic reflection of what audiences wanted to hear:

> Playing the same songs night after night, to keep from getting bored, we would experiment with certain tunes by changing the tempo or time structure of the song. For example: The way Frenchie Burke changed "Big Mamou" from 3/4 time to an upbeat fast-paced 4/4, adding new meaning to the old Link Davis chestnut. Or the way Waylon Jennings changed fast 4/4 beats to the half-time which became his style . . . With "Pipeliner," I half-timed the lyric and double-timed the tempo.

I also cut another gospel tune, one by Hank Locklin called "Glory Train" ("Holy Train"). I started singing that song when I was fifteen years old. To get the correct title, writer, and publishing credits, I called Hank Locklin in Alabama. He said he didn't remember writing a song called "Glory Train." So I sang him the song that I learned from his old radio show on KLEE in Houston. He said, "Oh, you mean, 'Holy Train.'" I'd already cut the song, and I sang "glory train . . ." So to make sure he got the proper credit, I had to put both titles.

I think every album I do from now on will have a gospel song on it.

I'M VERY, VERY PROUD of my daughter, Gaye. She's achieved so much, and she gives so much. She finished college, went on for her master's degree, and taught for a while. She started her own CPA firm, and she's acquired valuable rent properties in the city. She's done very, very well, a self-made woman. She is now chief financial officer for the San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind.

She's a deacon in the church, and she works with women in a place our church sponsors call the Alpha Home, which is a place for alcoholic women, and where prostitutes and dope addicts can go for help. She works with some of those women, and to hear their testimony, it's the power of God that moves through Gaye that enables her to help people.

One woman Gaye worked with spoke to our Bible class. She said she was going to her pusher to get her fix. But it was Sunday and church was letting out, and she had to walk by this church. She didn't want to pass the people coming out of the church. And she said to herself, "Why the hell are they lingering out front? I'm hurting bad." She was shaking and about to throw up. She said, "I needed a fix and I needed it bad."

So she walked by the church, and the people shunned her. She said, "If just one of those people had reached their hand out, I would have taken it." That story really got to me. She went on to tell our Bible class, "Any time that you people are driving and you see these people with the signs, you never know. It might be your helping hand with a dollar or a quarter that is gonna turn that person around."

To see that woman today, you'd never think she'd been a junkie. She looks like an airline stewardess. And ever since then, I'll have people honking behind me while I roll my window down. And I give what I can.

In the fall of 2002, I had expressed a desire to my daughter to help with her ministry. But I didn't know how I could do it when I couldn't communicate. She said, "Daddy, once you make your commitment to God that you want to help, He will help you communicate."

A few days after that conversation, I went back to see Dr. Richard Newman, the member of our church who was an ENT doctor. He went down my nose with a fiber-optic camera, a device they didn't have back in the seventies, when the same procedure required outpatient surgery. What's more, it was all up on a TV screen in real time, and you can see your own vocal cords. You can watch the whole apparatus, how it works. The only downside is, to get a clear view, they have to pull your tongue down past your chin.

Dr. Newman said, "There's a new man over at the university now. He's the best at spasmodic dysphonia. I want you to go see him, Dr. Blake Simpson."

And the first word that came out of Dr. Simpson's mouth was "Botox." Well, of course, I'd already tried that when it first came out, and it didn't work. I said, "Blake, that does not work for a singer." And he said, "I've never treated a singer."

I was averse to trying Botox again because when I took it before, what happened afterwards was worse than what I had going before I took it. He said, "Yeah, but I'm using a new method that maybe you ought to try. I don't go through the outside of the throat into the vocal folds. I go down the throat and inject the Botox into the false cords, which are the muscles around the vocal cords." He said, "I've done that with some other patients, and I want you to talk to them."

I said, "Well, which ones of them can sing?" And he said, "None of them."

I had nothing to lose. Dr. Simpson hooked me up and we gave it a try. Tried it once, no improvement; tried it again, nothing.

On January 21, 2003, Dr. Simpson gave me a third injection of Botox into the false cords in my throat. And that, as they say, was the charm.

For the first time in thirty years, the spasms that restricted my vocal cords from functioning normally were gone. I could speak and put sentences together in a normal flow! But my voice was in a lower register than it had ever been. Which is OK because as time progresses, the Botox wears off. As it does so, the register rises in pitch until your voice goes back to normal.

Thank God, finally, I can talk. I have to get a shot every eight to

ten weeks. It doesn't hurt, and it only takes about ten minutes. But I know that for about three weeks after the shot, I have to lower my keys when I sing with my band to fit the register of my voice. Each week it gets a little higher.

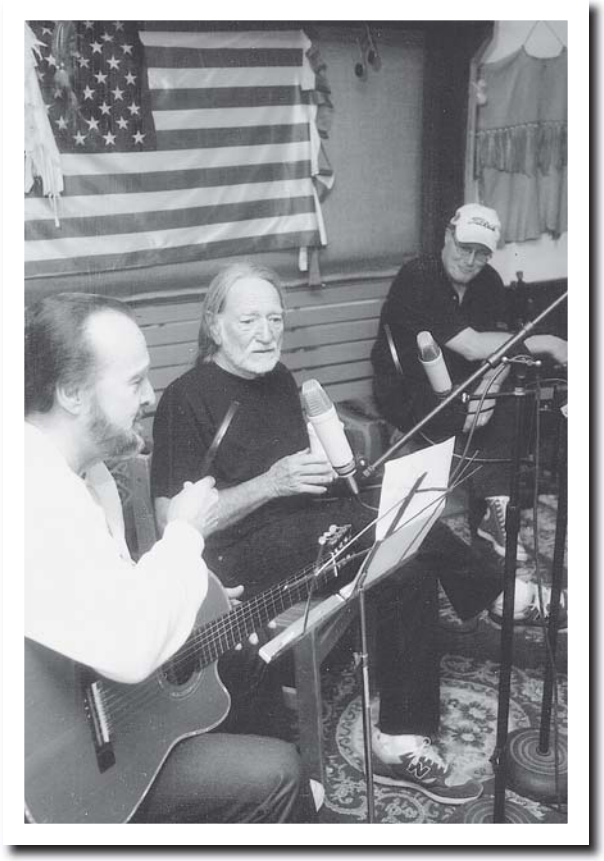
Every time it's different. It's the human body, a medication, and a muscle. It's not like an electrician, where you go, "Here's this wire and this wire, and you put them together and it works." It's the human body. It's gonna be different every time.

Singing is controlled yelling or screaming. To project, you have to raise your pitch. The first two weeks of Botox, your vocal range is limited because Botox is a paralyzing agent. That's what alleviates the spasms. When I sing, my strike zone is A and A-flat above middle C, so I have to judge everything accordingly. Right after a shot, I can't go very much above middle C, but I can hit a D below F. Fortunately, I have a band that can adjust to where the key changes aren't a problem. I'm the one that has the problem.

It is sort of a devil's bargain. When I start losing my ability to speak normally, that seems to be when I have the optimum vocal range. Dr. Simpson told me that one day I will be able to tell him the prescribed dosage that will offer the best possible balance between low and high, speaking and singing.

However, there is no way I would ever go back to the way it was when I couldn't talk. Maybe someday they'll find a cure for SD. Until then I will continue with the Botox injections. And I will continue to sing in a lower register, and write songs, and perform as long as people want to hear it, and help other with SD.

EARLY IN 2004, I received a Botox injection and the balance came together just right. Fortunately, I was able to quickly schedule some studio time with my friend, keyboardist, and coproducer, Bill Green. The results can be heard on my album *Honky Tonic*, which I think is the best singing I've done on record since the early 1970s. There's a new duet with me and Willie on "Whiskey River," where we go back and forth between my original Texas-shuffle arrangement and his famous up-tempo rock version. I also hooked up with a couple of young, up-and-coming Texas musicians. Kevin Fowler and I sang a duet on his tune "Ol' What's Her Name," and Cooder Graw backed me on a rockin' version of Willie's classic "I Gotta Get Drunk." Stephanie Urbina Jones, a young singer from San Antonio, dueted on a beautiful



Whiskey River (Take My Mind)*: Johnny and Willie recording the song together for the first time, with producer Bill Green. Luck, Texas, 2003.*

Clay Blaker tune, "Some People Just Get Lucky," and my good buddy Tommy Alverson from up around Fort Worth hooked up with me on another honky-tonker, "Jones on the Jukebox."

The album was released in 2004 on BGM Records out of San Antonio. It is available at better record stores and at my shows.

After all the instability in my life, after four marriages and two live-in girlfriends, plus countless one-night stands, I've been with the same woman for twenty years. I've got my daughter, Lynda's daughter and son, four grandchildren—Ashley, Ryan, Amanda, and Stephen—and I'm still friends with two of my three ex-wives.

As usual, a Willie Nelson lyric comes to mind: "After taking several readings / I'm surprised to find my mind's still fairly sound . . ."

I don't feel seventy years old, physically or spiritually. I feel more

like I'm thirty-five. I'm in better physical condition than I was before the heart surgery. I can speed-walk two miles in twenty-nine minutes. I weigh 180 pounds, which is about right for me.

I don't feel old. But I will say that I think I'm more stable now. I think I've mellowed. To quote another old friend of mine, ex–Dallas Cowboy and ex–rodeo cowboy Walt Garrison, "Old age takes care of a lot of things that preachers take credit for."

I'm happier now being a proud grandfather than I ever was back when I was a rounder. I am concerned about what my grandchildren might think when they read parts of this book. But I think the love will overcome the doubt. If they don't understand now, they will when they grow up: their grandfather was just a man, with faults and insecurities like every one else.

I've got my price up now to where if I work five dates a month, that will sustain a comfortable life. Right now I'm keeping the core of a band together. The main two guys I keep in the band are Herb Steiner on steel—he's been with me about ten years—and Justin Treviño on bass and harmony vocals. And then my next regular is Levi Mullen, my guitar player, who also doubles on fiddle, gut-string guitar, dobro, and harmonica. I have four or five different drummers that I choose from when the dates come up. I also still work singles with house bands. I'm fortunate that I can go anywhere in the state and find musicians that can play my material without a rehearsal.

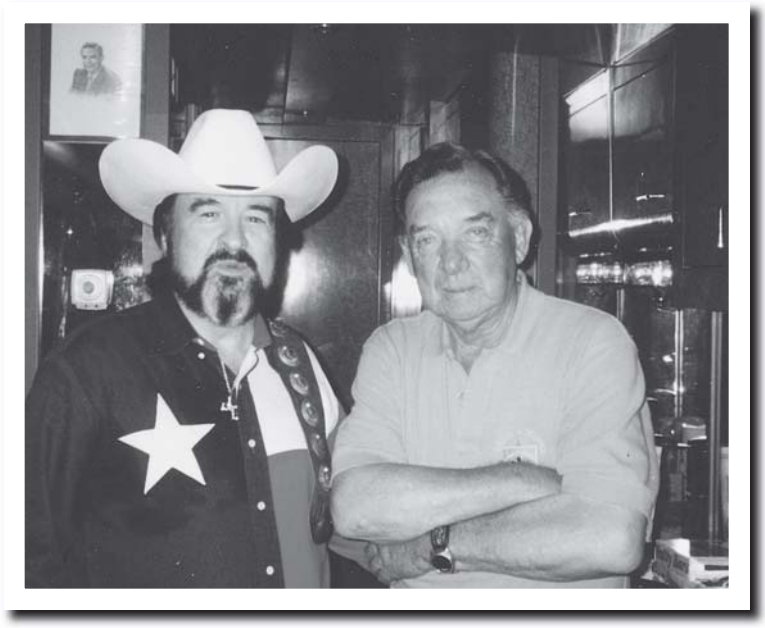
In the summer of 2003, I played Willie Nelson's Fourth of July picnic at Three Rivers Canyon. This is a new venue outside of Austin in the Hill Country, a natural amphitheater about a par four from Willie's house and studio at Pedernales. Price was there, and Pat Green and Leon Russell, Billy Joe Shaver and Merle Haggard, the gospel group the Bells of Joy, Billy Bob Thornton, the Geezinslaws, Kimmie Rhodes, and Heather Myles. And, oh yeah, the Grateful Dead and Neil Young and Crazy Horse were also there. They brought their own audience, some of whom were probably hearing people like me and maybe even Willie for the first time.

I've played maybe eight of Willie's picnics over the years, and they've always been a mixture of traditional Texas country and rock, which is the Willie way of doing things. Willie is seventy-two years old, and he looks it, but he don't act it. He's got a young outlook on life, which keeps him going. There's always something going on with Will.

In the last few years he's had several albums released on Lost Highway. His latest as of this writing, *It Will Always Be*, knocked me out. In 2003, he had a No. 1 country single with Toby Keith called "Beer for My Horses," which was also a No. 1 video. He had another No. 1 video with Lee Ann Womack. As we speak, he's got two movies and another live album in the making. All this is in addition to playing more than 200 show dates a year.

At the 2003 picnic, it was drizzling rain all day. VIP parking was 200 yards from the bandstand. I was parked a few yards behind Ray Price's bus. After about an hour or so, he came over to my bus. I was sitting on the coach, tuning my guitar, and I looked up. Ray was standing in the door of the bus. He said, "I just dropped by to say hello." I said, "Come on in and sit down." His response was, "Come on over to my bus. I want to talk to you for a minute."

It was close to the time when me and the band were supposed to do our show. I went to Ray's bus so he could tell me about his recent aneurysm surgery. About this time, my drummer, Martin Stietle, knocked on the door and said, "John, they're ready for us." I said, "Where's the



Bush with Ray Price, backstage at Willie Nelson's Fourth of July Picnic, 2002, Luckenbach, Texas. Photo courtesy of Ferdy Calderon.

golf cart?" He said, "All the golf carts are tied up. We're gonna have to walk." It's still drizzling rain. Ray Price said, "Wait a minute, Sweets. I'll go with you." I thought that was strange of him to want to do that. He was seventy-seven years old, but we walked that 200 yards straight up the hill to the stage.

On the bandstand there were lots of people milling around, and I quickly lost sight of Ray. The Geezinslaws were coming off, and we were going on, with mass confusion abounding. Willie walked up and asked me if I need a guitar player. Jokingly, I said, "Yes. Do you know where I can find one?" He laughed and said, "What's your last song? I want to play guitar with you." I told him, "Drivin' Nails in My Coffin."

We were scheduled to come on right ahead of Merle Haggard. We had seventeen minutes allotted for our show, timed to the second. When the green light comes on, you start. When the yellow light comes on, you got one minute. When the red light comes on, they pull the plug.

During "Driving Nails," I saw Ray walk up close to Willie. While the band was taking a round of solos, I asked Willie, "Who is that masked man? Check his ID. I don't see any backstage pass." When I stepped to the microphone to do the last verse of the song, Willie and Ray Price stepped up to the other microphone and sang it with me: "I'm just drivin' nails in my coffin, every time I drink a bottle of booze / I'm just drivin' nails in my coffin, drivin' those nails over you."

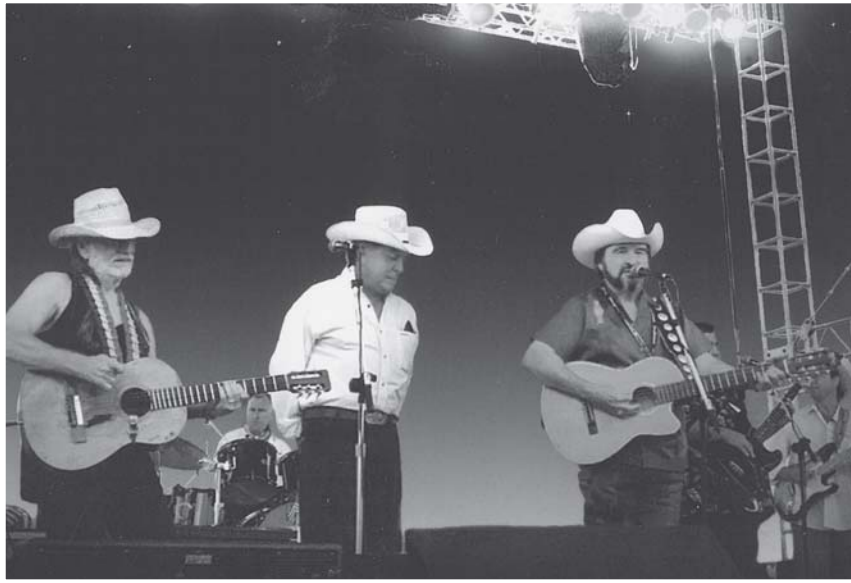
It was a thrilling moment for me, one I'll never forget. Because the two guys that I have the most respect for in this business, my two musical mentors, were up there singing with me. I got this lump in my throat. And my inner voice kept telling me, "Don't lose it here, John. Wait until you get to the bus." I thought, "My God, where is a photographer when you need one?" I thought the moment was lost in time.

The next night in Bandera, we were playing to a packed house at the Cabaret Club. An old friend of mine, Rick Lauderdale, from Wichita Falls, came up to say hello. Said he'd been at the picnic and how much he'd enjoyed seeing his three heroes onstage at the same time.

I said, "Yes, it was quite a moment. Too bad no one got a picture." He said, "Oh. I got one. And I'll send you copy." Which he did, and it's in this book.

Later I asked Willie, "How'd you get Ray to do that?" Willie said, "I didn't. It was Ray's idea. He said, 'Let's go sing with John.'"

In all the years, this was only the second time Ray and I had sung together onstage. I sang harmony behind Ray one time, on New Year's Eve in Tulsa, Oklahoma, when Charlie Harris was sick and couldn't



Tres Amigos: Willie and Ray onstage with Bush at Willie's Fourth of July Picnic. Austin, Texas, 2003. Photo by Rick Lauderdale.

make the show. And this was the first time that all three of us had been onstage together.

On August 16, 2003, along with Kris Kristofferson and my late hero Lefty Frizzell, I was inducted into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame at the Tex Ritter Museum in Carthage, Texas. This meant more to me than any Country Music Association award could have because the prerequisite for entering the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame is that you must be a native Texan. You are voted in by the other members, who are also Texans.

The Nashville awards are all political. Those votes are decided by the record companies. I was never part of that scene, and don't care to be. To quote my good friend Carl Smith, who by the way was inducted into the Country Music Association Hall of Fame last year, CMA stands for "Country, My Ass!"

The Texas Country Music Hall of Fame was started seven years ago by Tommie Ritter Smith, the niece of the late Tex Ritter. Among

those who were inducted ahead of me are Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, Jim Reeves, Ray Price, Willie Nelson, Cindy Walker, Charlie Walker, Waylon Jennings, Gene Watson, Tanya Tucker, and Nat Stuckey. Most of these artists have been among my lifelong heroes, and now I am one of them. It blows my mind.

My band performed at the induction ceremony. Willie was on hand to present the award to me, as well as the one to Kris. He told that stupid story about the Mugwomp, a club where we played when we first met. David Frizzell performed a tribute to his brother, Lefty, and the Geezinslaws opened the show. The event was sold out two months in advance.

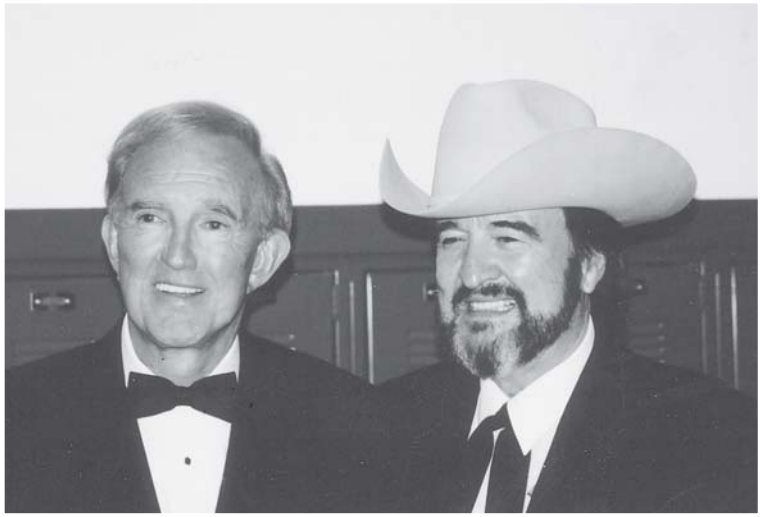
It was one of the proudest moments of my life. My mother was in the audience, along with my brother and the other members of my immediate family and many longtime friends. But the performance was accompanied by intense fear because of the Botox injections that had lowered my register. I didn't know for sure what was going to come out when I sang.

To ease my tension, I announced, "For the last forty years I've seen a whole lot of Texas. But tonight is the first time I've seen Texas looking back at me." And I heard this thunderous ovation. Fortunately, the Lord was with me, and I sang the songs in the low register, and the audience responded with two standing ovations, one at the end of the performance, and one when I received the award.

Just think: the kid from Kashmere Gardens being inducted into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame. I had to look down to make sure that there was none of that mud on my boots.

I wish my dad could have been present that night, but I feel in my heart that he was. I once gave my dad a real fancy Framus guitar. After he died, I got it back, and now it's in the Hall of Fame with other mementos from my career. So, in a way, he's represented there, too.

IN THE COURSE of writing this book, I've had occasion to reflect on my life. Some of the memories have been painful, but working through them has been therapeutic, in a way. It has also stimulated my creativity. I wish I had written this song earlier, when my dad was still alive, but I'll share it with you here. It's called "Kashmere Gardens Mud," and I hope to record it soon.



Ralph Emery backstage with Bush at the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame in Carthage, Texas, 2003.

Johnny Bush, being inducted in the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame, and Willie Nelson, 2003.

The southern wind blows through Kashmere Gardens
With the smell of Pasadena in the air
Nothing good ever grew in Kashmere Gardens
Only bitter weeds and flowers of despair

A three-room shotgun shack was home in Kashmere Gardens
With a house out back and a shallow water well
Everybody lived the same in Kashmere Gardens
Like a chapter in a Steinbeck novel tells

In that unforgiven land north of the bayou
Even cotton failed to grow in that mud
And it was that Kashmere Gardens mud
That stained my memory
And that memory still lingers in my blood

In 1943 the war was raging
And I remember being overcome by fear
It was the beginning of the age of atomic power
And the preachers told us all the end was near

In that broken promise land called Kashmere Gardens
Is where my mama's love for my daddy died
He never saw the signs of her leaving
Or the hunger he could never satisfy

I'VE HAD a good career. I'm not complaining. But I know if it wasn't for spasmodic dysphonia, things might have been different. At one time, I *was* bigger than Willie. At the same time I was fronting his band, my songs were high on the national charts when his weren't. As I said before, that was his plan. He couldn't have been happier for me.

But spasmodic dysphonia was not part of *my* plan. People have asked me if I'm bitter about what happened, about losing my voice just as I could have been on the verge of superstardom. And I have to tell them no. I don't think I was ever bitter. But there were times when I was bewildered and frightened. For years I felt overwhelming guilt. I

thought it was my fault, that my career was taken away from me as punishment from God for my transgressions.

But I think—and I've had to learn this—that to keep your sanity and a good perspective, you've got to believe that everything that happens, no matter how grim, happens for the best. Things happen when they're supposed to.

I learned that from the wisdom of Willie Nelson and from my own experiences and from a lifetime of watching and listening to people and from singing to them and acting out their lives in my songs. Things happen when they're supposed to. Accept and play the cards you're dealt.

It's easy to say that things happen for a reason. But to really believe it, you have to go over it in your mind every day. To tell yourself that when your little dog dies, or a even a child dies, that there must be a reason for it and that something good always comes out of a tragedy. How in the world can you really believe that? But if you don't, you're going to go crazy. There was a reason for it. Things happen when they're supposed to happen. Like this book.

The simple truth is, it could have been a lot worse for me. I could have never got a break in this business. I could have spent my whole life pulling pipe in some oil patch, imagining myself onstage as a singer. Instead, I got to live my dream. I have played my part in continuing this great tradition of Texas country music that has been my reason for being, all my life. I've watched the music ebb and flow from Bob Wills and Floyd Tillman through Ray Price and Willie Nelson to Junior Brown and Pat Green, and I'm proud to say that I'm still in the game.

The four albums I've released since 1997—*Talk to My Heart*, *Lost Highway Saloon*, *Green Snakes*, and *Honky Tonic*—kind of go together. What do they say about a person as an artist, a guy in his sixties and now his seventies, still making records, still drawing good crowds in Texas dance halls? I think they say that I've evolved. I would hope that I have. And I think these albums say that I'm keeping an open mind, and I do have an eye on this Texas music movement because these kids are drawing ten times the crowd that I'm drawing, and there's got to be a reason for it. I'd be a fool if I didn't pay attention

In contrast to the powers that be in Nashville, who have either boldly or subtly set out to kill the original roots of country music, in Texas it is our musical birthright and responsibility to keep these sources alive. So many of the artists I admired and looked up to when I was

young—Jimmy Rodgers, Bob Wills, Tommy Duncan, Jerry Jericho, Ted Daffan, Floyd Tillman, Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell, Hank Williams, Tex Ritter, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash—are now gone. But thanks to Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, and George Jones, as well as the younger artists who emulate the spirit if not necessarily the sound of these heroes, I feel confident that our music will survive and stay real. If I have been able to play a role in this process, then I am grateful.

A good friend of mine asked me the other day if, when I looked over the manuscript for this book, I had any regrets about the story I've told—the story of my life and the story of the music I love so much. I would like to say that I regret that people were hurt by some of my actions, and I regret the time that I had to spend away from my daughter to pursue a career. I hope that certain people have forgiven me for some of the things I've done and didn't do, and perhaps others have learned from my mistakes. And I hope I'll be forgiven again after they read this book.

Amen.

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JOHNNY BUSH DISCOGRAPHY

Singles

All Star 7166 "In My World All Alone"/"You Said This Before" 1958
All Star 7172 "Your Kind of Love"/"I Should Have Known" 1958
Melco 103 "Cold Empty Space" (A-side only) 1961
New Star 127 "Sound of a Heartache"/"A Moment Isn't Very Long" 1967
Stop 126 "You Oughta Hear Me Cry"/"Jealously Insane" 1967
Stop 160 "What a Way to Live"/"I Can Feel You in His Arms" 1968
Stop 193 "Undo the Right"/"Conscience Turn Your Back" 1968
Stop 232 "Each Time"/"Tonight We Steal Heaven Again" 1968
Stop 257 "You Gave Me a Mountain"/"Back from the Wine" 1969
Stop 310 "My Cup Runneth Over"/"Tonight I'm Going Home to an Angel" 1969

Stop 354 "Jim, Jack and Rose"/"I'll Go to a Stranger" 1969
Stop 371 "Warmth of the Wine"/"Daddy Lived in Houston" 1970
Stop 380 "My Joy"/"I'm Warm by the Flame" 1970
Stop 392 "City Lights"/"The Joy of Loving You" 1971
Stop 396 "Mama's Hands"/"It's All in the Game" 1971
Stop 405 "Rake Me over the Coals"/"Jealously Insane" 1971
Million 1 "I'll Be There"/"I Can Feel You in His Arms" 1972
Million 21 "Rake Me Over the Coals"/"Jealously Insane" 1972
RCA 74-0745 "Whiskey River"/"Right Back in Your Arms Again" 1972
RCA 74-0799 "Chet's Tune"/"Chet's Tune, Part 2" (guest appearance) 1972
RCA 74-0867 "There Stands the Glass"/"These Lips Don't Know How to Say Goodbye" 1973
RCA 74-0931 "Here Comes the World Again"/"That Rain Makin' Baby of Mine" 1973

RCA APBO 0041 "Green Snakes on the Ceiling"/"Drinking My Baby Right out of My Mind" 1973
RCA APBO 0164 "We're Back in Love Again"/"Wine Friend of Mine Stand by Me" 1973
RCA APBO 0240 "Toy Telephone"/"From Tennessee to Texas" 1974
RCA APBO 0306 "Wasted Wine"/"When It's Midnight in Dallas" 1974
RCA PB 10070 "Home in San Antone"/"I Could Feel Him Touching You" 1974
Warner Bros. 8141 "Loud Music and Strong Wine"/"Sunday Morning" 1975
Starday 114 "My Mind Is a Bridge"/"Conscience Turn Your Back" 1975
Starday 128 "You'll Never Leave Me Completely" (B-side unknown) 1975
Gusto 165 "You'll Never Leave Me Completely"/"Put Me out of Your Memory" 1977
Gusto 9006 "She Just Made Me Love You More"/"Hands Can Say a Lot" 1978
Whiskey River 791 "When My Conscience Hurts the Most"/"Drivin' Nails In My Coffin" 1979
Delta 10041 "Whiskey River"/"When My Conscience Hurts the Most" 1981
Delta 11391 "You Sure Tell It Like It Is, George Jones" (A-side only) 1982
Amarillo Depot DS 1004-4 "Unchained Melody" (A-side only) 1982
Step One 369 "The Twenty-Fourth Hour"/"I Can't See Houston from Here" (with Darryl McCall) 1987

LPs

Stop 10002 *Sound of a Heartache* 1968
Stop 10005 *Undo the Right* 1968
Stop 10008 *You Gave Me a Mountain* 1969
Stop 10014 *Bush Country* 1970
Stop 1028 *The Greatest Hits of Johnny Bush* 1972
Million 1001 *Best of Johnny Bush* 1972
RCA LSP 4817 *Whiskey River/There Stands the Glass* 1973
RCA APL-1-0216 *Here Comes the World Again* 1973
RCA APL-1-0369 *Texas Dance Hall Girl* 1974
Hilltop JS-6081 *You Ought to Hear Me Cry* (mid-seventies; exact date unknown)
Power Pak PO-217 *Bush Country* (mid-seventies; exact date unknown)
Whiskey River WRLP 7961 *Amarillo Depot* 1979
Whiskey River WRLP 8024 *Live at Dance Town* (double LP) 1980
Delta 1004 *Whiskey River* 1980
Delta 1139 *Together Again* (with Willie Nelson) 1982
Delta 1147 *I Can Feel Him Touching You (All Over Me)* 1983

CDs

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Greatest Hits, Vol. 2, 1968–1972 (Texas Legend Series Vol. 2, GH 293)
Sound of a Heartache (Classic Country JB 9601 D)
Whiskey River/There Stands the Glass (Texas Legend Series, Vol. 1 WR 932 CD)
Hot Texas Country, with Darryl McCall (Step One SOR 0017)
Time Changes Everything (Texas Legend Series TCE 194)
Whiskey River (Bellaire CD 1115)
Johnny Bush Is Back (Collectables COL-5708)
Talk to Your Heart (Watermelon CD 11069)
Lost Highway Saloon (Lone Star TMG-LS 4001)
Johnny Bush Sings Bob Wills (Lone Star TMG-LS 4002)
Green Snakes (Lone Star TMG-LS 4008)
Honky Tonic (Lone Star)
Kashmere Gardens Mud: A Tribute to Houston's Country Soul (Icehouse Music)

Johnny Bush, Selected Discography with Other Artists
Title, Label, Catalog Number

"Hot Texas Country," duet, Johnny Bush & Darryl McCall, Step One Records, Wor 0017
"Texas Proud 1836–1986," Compilation, Texas Proud, Ca1002
"Blessed Or Damned," Dale Watson, Hightone, Hcd8070
"Song of South Austin," Cornell Hurd Band, Behemouth, 1010
"A Stagecoach Named Desire," Cornell Hurd Band, Behemouth, 1009
"At Large," Cornell Hurd Band, Behemouth, 1008
"Texas Fruit Shack," Cornell Hurd Band, Behemouth, 1007
"Cool & Unusual Punishment," Cornell Hurd Band, Behemouth, 1006
"Tennessee To Texas, "Billy Mata, BGM 20198-2
"Texas Honky Tonk, "Justin Trevino, Lone Star, Tmgls-4004
"The Last Country Song," Hermann Lammers Meyer, Desert Kid, 96008
"Stories We Could Tell," Hermann Lammers Meyer, Tyrolis, Cd351848
"The Good Old Days," Hermann Lammers Meyers, Desert Kid, Dk200426
"The Offenders Reunion—Can't Get The Hell Out Of Texas," Bear Family, Bcd-16124-Ah
"Unapologetically Honky Tonk," Lonnie Spiker, Negalith, 41202
"Ten in Texas," Compilation, Icehouse Music, Xlt.
"Winds of Change," Johnny Lyon, New Country, Jfl 1005
"Trip to the Country," Jody Cameron, R&R, Jc--0266rr
"The Influence," Floyd Tillman, Heart of Texas, 105
"Texas Unplugged Vol. II," Compilation, Palo Duro
"Honky Tonk.Com," Dickey Overbey, Southland, Sr7741
"Heroes & Friends," Tommy Alverson, Smith Music, 7025-2
"Life After Nashville," Johnny & Joan Cox, Msa, 000
"Steeling—A Tribute To Ernest Tubb," Lynn Owsley, Ernest Tubb Records.com
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