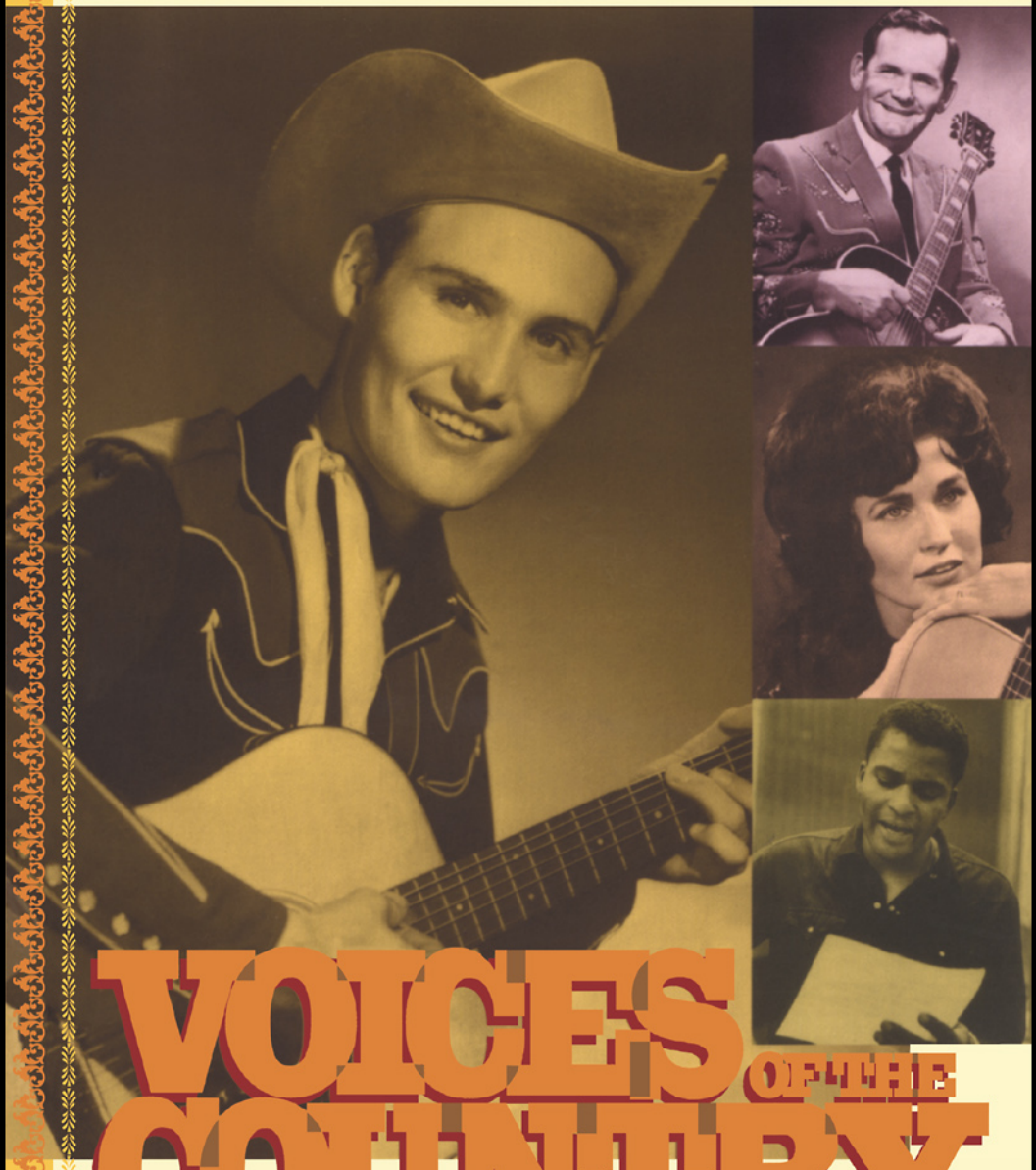
Interviews with Classic Country Performers



Voices of the Country

Michael Streissguth

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To my Big Three Trio: Emily, Cate, and Willie

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When I first began interviewing blues singers many years ago, an endeavor that ultimately led me to country singers, my friend Johnny Sprague of Damascus, Maryland, almost always accompanied me to their shows and waited while I conversed with performers. Johnny and I met in the early I980s when he was managing the bakery where I worked after school. I immediately learned about his fabulously large record collection, which spanned Americana and beyond, from the Johnson Mountain Boys to Muddy Waters to Washington D.C.'s sultan of insanity, the late Root Boy Slim. Together, sometimes with my brother David, we logged hours sifting through racks of used vinyl in shops such as the Music Trader in Frederick, Maryland, the Record Exchange in College Park, Maryland, and Orpheus Records in Washington, D.C.

The records stowed at home, we often drove his '76 Monte Carlo—with its impossibly long hood—to the Wax Museum, the Carter Barron Amphitheatre, Friendship Station, the Bayou, the Roxy, and other music venues in and around D.C. The best spot, though, was Twist and Shout in Bethesda, Maryland (later immortalized by Mary Chapin-Carpenter in her "Down at the Twist and Shout"). Although housed in a small VFW hall, giants trod on its linoleum floor: we saw Carey Bell, A.C.Reed, Hank Ballard, Sleepy LaBeef, and others whom we considered gigantic.

On Sunday nights, Johnny religiously taped Steve Hoffman's *Blues Experience* on WDCU-FM. Hoffman's playlist sliced through Washington's radio pap, unleashing blues new and old and necessitating more visits to the record stores.

Sadly, the *Blues Experience* and Twist and Shout have shuttered their doors. But Johnny is still around, and we still comb the record stores, although not as

frequently since I've moved to New York. I am thankful for his friendship and for helping me discover new music.

I must also thank two editors who have supported me in recent years: Michael McCall, formerly of *Country Music* magazine (which is now, sadly, defunct) and Greg Loescher of *Goldmine*. Over the years, they have patiently listened to my story ideas and even bought a few. Portions of five interviews in this book first appeared in their magazines: Hank Locklin, Sheb Wooley, and Billy Walker in *Country Music,* and Charley Pride and Loretta Lynn in *Goldmine*.

I cannot forget two additional champions: Alanna Nash, author of *The Colonel: The Extraordinary Story of Colonel Tom Parker and Elvis Presley,* whose encouragement, tips, and observations keep me going, and Chrissie Dickinson, a wonderful writer who kindly published my work during her editorship at the *Journal of Country Music*.

My first editor is always Leslie Bailey Streissguth, my wife. She attacks lame prose and dubious observations, saving me enormous embarrassment. Thank you, Leslie. My friend and neighbor Ed Brown carefully edited the manuscript, probing various points and bringing elegance to more phrases and passages than I'd care to admit.

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Finally, I thank Richard Carlin at Routledge, who agreed that the voices of the country deserve an unfiltered forum. Richard bought my first book at Schirmer Books. I'm happy that we have reconnected.

Introduction

On the cover of Studs Terkel's *Division Street: America,* small people, dwarfed by the steel and wooden El station, sauntered down the sidewalk of a Chicago neighborhood. Did the rattling trains on the entangled tracks above drown their conversation? What did they think about the Chicago world around them, torn in the 1960s by ethnic strife and political hurricanes? Intrigued, I bought Terkel's oral history of Chicago from the used bookstore, carried it to my college dorm room, and pored over the interviews with the city's homemakers, activists, laborers, and immigrants. It had been twenty years since the book was first published, but almost immediately *Division Street* enlivened my romance with the Windy City, a romance recently stirred to life by British writers Giles Oakley and Mike Rowe, who foraged through the city in the 1950s searching for the voices of blues music.

Terkel, in his foraging through Chicago, yielded Chicagoans who defined the city, who told its stories. They and their interviewer painted for me an alluring, ever-young place. But Terkel's cigar-stained hands had done more than capture a vision of Chicago: he had pulled open curtains to reveal the rewards of sitting down with somebody, rolling tape, and inviting conversation.

The urge to try it myself—to interview people—became irresistible when *Division Street* found a mate: Peter Guralnick's *Lost Highway*. It was Guralnick's second compendium of dispatches from the world of roots music, and its mingling on my nightstand, in my hands, on my desk, with *Division Street* that incited me. I picked it up for a couple bucks in a small bookstore next to the Uptown Theater on Connecticut Avenue in Washington D.C., and I devoured it like a novice reading the Gospels. Guralnick's stories, poignant and atmospheric, spotlighted Bobby "Blue" Bland, Otis Spann, Charlie Feathers, Sleepy LaBeef, and others living in the shadow of Elvis Presley.

The impulse to hear these artists' stories for myself and then connect them to their music drove me to scan concert listings for artists whom I might interview, and book and record stores for background on them. By the summer of 1985, closing in on nineteen, I was sitting on a motel room bed in Bethesda, Maryland, listening to the blind harpist Sam Myers as he reached back for stories about trade schools for the blind, switch-blade fights, and Elmore James. And tape was rolling.

Then there was blues queen Koko Taylor, in the night, her dark sweaty profile glistening against nearby stage lights. We chatted in her battered van that unbelievably had made it from Chicago to Fort Dupont Park in south-east Washington, D.C., while the blues of Lonnie Brooks thundered from the stage through the open window. (I would repeat a sweaty summer van interview many years later with country singer Billy Walker, only Billy— mindful of distracting noises—never rolled down the windows.) During the years that followed, when on breaks from college, I sat deep in Chicago's South Side with pianist Sunnyland Slim, in the basement of the Washington, D.C.Armory with Piedmont bluesman John Cephas, who was a carpenter there, backstage with Lowell Fulson in a New York nightclub. Through these encounters, I lived the dreams that Terkel and Guralnick had inspired.

Reflecting upon my reading of Terkel and Guralnick and my first face-to-face encounters with bluesmen and women from a distance of almost twenty years, it seems clear to me that life stories, not necessarily career stories, kept me—and Terkel and Guralnick, I gather—searching for interviews. Many of the musicians I interviewed had risen from the worst of American experiences—racism, poverty, despair, ignorance—to make an impression on American culture and articulate the plight of the poor, the oppressed, and the hopeful ones in search of escape. Their stories—shared in song and interviews—were deeply affected by the color of their skin, but they were by no means stories exclusive to blacks.

Blues performers weren't alone selling music informed by their experiences, as *Lost Highway* made clear. Like Guralnick's first book *Feel Like Going Home, Lost Highway* broke down music critics and scholars' barriers that divided black and white roots artists by touching on what made them cousins: their music that was their blood, their dogged pursuit of dreams, and their humble rural beginnings that informed their music and helped them maintain an artist-audience bond.

Country, I came to understand, wasn't so far from the blues. (This is a mantra that Charley Pride recites later in this book.) So when I began writing in the mid-1990s about country, the music of the white South, I found that the stories in conversations that made me forget about my questions or forget to change tapes or forget where I was were the stories about making the crop, about the candy pullings where fiddles and dancers converged, about the white-knuckled negotiation with the Depression. Of course my interviews covered much more than life and grind around the ol' homeplace, but that core subject and its place in my subjects' music fascinated me.

Country music, like blues, is often judged by the performer's origins. That's a standard we hold for few other musical genres. Do people care if a classical pianist comes from Hazard or Hamberg? No way. But many look askance at country artists who haven't grown up in rural American settings or who do not at least acknowledge country roots in some way. This umbilical connection between rural America and its country music is sacred and often defended with righteous indignation when cut into by radio consultants and recording

executives or anybody else. The indignation heightens precipitously when men and women who broke through as country artists attempt to forsake country music's roots. Just ask Eddy Arnold, Ray Price, or Faith Hill, artists who were raised up in the rural South but who weathered critical storms when they began edging toward a purely pop sound. An artist's bond with the country or with country music roots remains central to his or her music's veracity. Country music scholar Bill C.Malone echoes this opinion: "If I'm unable to believe that the performer has actually 'lived' the life that is sung about, I want to believe that he or she respects the culture that surrounded the music."[1] In country, it's never been about just the music. The voices of the country mean something too.

As I WRITE THIS, the soundtrack from the Coen brothers' O *Brother Where Art Thou* has reached five million and with every ring of the cash register, the album's effect seems to grow in kind. In a media landscape that was largely devoid of traditional music, suddenly bluegrass concerts air during public television fundraising, Ralph Stanley appears in rock arenas, and sweetly spun singing in the style of Emmylou Harris and Alison Kraus dreamily rises from Merman-like sirens such as Reba Mclntyre and the Dixie Chicks. Who would have thought that the soundtrack from a film featuring a pencil-mustachioed George Clooney would carry traditional country music and bluegrass out of the American Legion halls and the obscure Saturday morning radio slots, debunking the myth that people don't care anymore? This book, even, is an outgrowth, inspired by my belief that many after all *are* interested in the lives of the people who helped bring country music to where it is today. If not for O *Brother,* these interviews may have lain in boxes strewn around my dark and dusty attic, trampled over by my children on imaginary adventures.

These interviewees have roots dyed in the same tradition that imbues O *Brother*. Even Eddy Arnold, who first took country uptown in the late 1940s, grew up steeped in the culture that hewed country music. He soaked up Jimmie Rodgers' records on a wind-up player and the local fiddle wizards who cavorted in his midst, and—as his early Tennessee Plowboy billing suggests—he knew well the back end of a mule. Experiences such as these, which Loretta Lynn, Charley Pride, Chet Atkins, and the rest share, infuse their music with meaning true to country music's origins. It is only relatively recently, within the past twenty years, as these historical artists have receded from the day-to-day musical mix, that country music has strayed from its rural moorings.

Arnold, Lynn, Pride, and Atkins, of course, were admitted to the Country Music Hall of Fame in return for their contributions to country music, and others spotlighted here, Hank Locklin, Sheb Wooley, and Billy Walker, for example, who may never make the Hall of Fame, still receive honor for their lifting on behalf of country music. Locklin and Walker are regularly invited back to country music's mother ship, the *Grand Ole Opry,* and they are remembered for their many hits: Locklin for "Please Help Me I'm Falling" and "Send Me the Pillow that You Dream On," and Walker for "Charlie's Shoes" and "Cross the Brazos at Waco."

But there is yet another tier of artists considered in this book. They bubble and flare like magma in the subterranean, below the Hall of Famers, below the journeymen. Their names—Red Kirk and Ginny Wright—are virtually unknown to those who discuss, listen to, and write about country music; they are barely footnotes in country music history, but that doesn't mean their stories deserve to be muted. In fact, their insights tell us a lot about toil outside fame's glare, outside Nashville, where Ginny Wright seems never to have worked and where Red Kirk trod only occasionally. Furthermore, their relative obscurity means their answers to questions crackle with newness, unlike those who've unceasingly repeated recollections for historians and reporters. Perhaps their responses are tainted by the bitterness of fame denied, but they are nonetheless fresh and informative. Their stories also remind us that for every Marty Robbins or Tammy Wynette who emerged from rural obscurity to find lasting appeal in the spotlight, there are hundreds who got close and failed. There are hundreds who try today, a and there will be hundreds who try tomorrow. Most will find work in fields other than music, perhaps in agriculture, computers, or retail. But many will s surrender their dreams at some point. Red and Ginny didn't. Even after s seeing that they would never be *Billboard* monarchs, they continued returning to the studio, picking up a weekend gig, or pitching a song to someone who could do something with it. (Kirk died shortly before a planned song pitching trip to Nashville.) Nor did they forget that except for a few miscalculations, the plotlines of their lives might have developed differently. Their stories, as presented in this collection, are among the best.

All of the artists herein show us a variety of stages and faces in country music. Red Kirk hung around Knoxville, an often overlooked farm team city to the major league town of Nashville, where he slouched in sedan backseats with giants-in-waiting such as Don Gibson and Chet Atkins on midnight rides home from school house shows. Ginny Wright witnessed intimately—too intimately, she might say—the dealings of Fabor Robison, who figured prominently in the careers of Jim Reeves, Johnny Horton, the Browns, and others, yet left a world in which nary a person spoke well of him. Billy Walker toured with Hank Williams in the singer's final days upon this earth and witnessed Elvis Presley's first big Memphis show; Hank Locklin muddled along in the mire of song publisher and Four Star Records owner Bill McCall, who a few years later would stymie Patsy Cline with unreasonable contracts. Artist and repertoire (A&R) representatives Chet Atkins and Anita Kerr reveal glimpses of the Nashville studios and the personalities who haunted them. And, in turn, artists in this book peer back at Atkins and Kerr and at country music's other great producers: Owen Bradley, Don Law, Steve Sholes, and Jack Clement.

To BE SURE, oral history is not the perfect telling of history. It often suffers from warped memories and perspectives. In editing this collection, therefore, I discarded what seemed too warped, and where statements seemed obscure on first glance, I added notes for clarification. I also attempted to place the

interviews in context with introductions to each of them, and by adding further elucidating information such as *Billboard* chart data, dates, places, and so forth.

Readers should know that in addition to throwing out responses with dubious probity and adding clarifying notes, I took other measures, such as rearranging the order of questions to improve readability and deleting questions and responses that seemed irrelevant to the discussion of country music and the artists' lives and careers. In the final analysis, the artists featured in this book deserve to be heard from directly, and judged accordingly. They are voices of country, fiber of the music.

Note

1. Bill C.Malone, *Don't Get above Your Raisin': Country Music and the Southern Working Class*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.

Eddy Arnold

Seems Like a Dream

EDDY ARNOLD HAS ALL THE MARKINGS of a man's man. His tall, rugged appearance and deep, homespun voice suggest the mingling of John Wayne and Andy Griffith: solid guy, charming, practical. He's loyal to his friends and business associates—as I learned when my biography of Arnold angered his manager back in the 1990s. And he gets along as easily with the governor of Tennessee as he does with Bobby the glass cutter who rents a building from him.

But Eddy wasn't always so together. Such was apparent early in his career when shady wheelers and dealers fleeced him of newly earned money, and when RCA executives, hovering about recording sessions in the 1940s, made him quiver. In my interviews with him, he remembered clinging to one engineer at those sessions, friendly Jeff Miller: "He was a familiar face. I hope you understand where I'm coming from. I'm a boy from down South. I know I'm fooling with Yankees, and I don't know 'em and they don't know me. I don't know whether they liked what I'm doing or not. I knew what I was doing was doing pretty good. That's the reason I wanted the same engineer. He understood me, and I could talk to him."

Such comments and others in the following interview reveal a country boy—later a man's man—negotiating the bends in a road to fame. And even though that road often veered away from country tastes and sounds, it never really left the country. Arnold was inescapably country, fashioned by its music, insularity, and day-to-day challenges, and that's hard to keep in mind when listening to his fabulously lush hits of the 1960s, such as "Turn the World Around" and "Then You Can Tell Me Goodbye."

Chester County, Tennessee, in the 1920s and 1930s was flat-land farm country east of Memphis and south of Jackson, the kind of place—like the hills of southwestern Virginia or the plains of Texas—that birthed and nourished country music. When Eddy was growing up there, he heard traditional fiddles and ballads on surrounding farms, and encountered real rural hardship: back-breaking work, fickle markets for farm products, and splintered living conditions. There was tragedy, too, the kind that showed up so often in Carter Family songs and Vernon Dalhart ballads: on his eleventh birthday his father died, leaving widow and children to face accumulated debts and the auctioneer's gavel. Their land was

sold on the bank steps in nearby Henderson on a mid-December day in 1930, and the Arnolds, once fairly prosperous landowners, faced Christmas as lowly tenant farmers. So, Eddy knew about life's bite. When he sang on his first Victor record about a woman who abandoned her child to "go out on a party," he related to a child's loss of a parent, and sympathetically recited the chorus: "Mommy, please stay home with me."

ONCE KNOWN AS THE TENNESSEE PLOWBOY because of his farming origins, Arnold is the sole surviving member of an exclusive fraternity that accelerated country music's hard-charging commercial momentum. Working from a foundation that Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family laid in the 1920s, Arnold, along with other titans such as Ernest Tubb, Red Foley, and Hank Williams, carried rural sounds to the ever-growing record markets and filled the expanding mass media space that by the mid- to late 1940s saw a proliferation of disc jockey shows and programming featuring live country music (much of it modeled after Nashville's *Grand Ole Opry* and Chicago's *National Barn Dance*).

Ultimately, Hank Williams rang loudest through country music history, thanks to his lurid flare out early in life, personal charm, and sexy rhythms and lyrics. But back in the 1940s nobody equaled Eddy Arnold's record sales. And nobody appealed more to listeners beyond the South and the farm. With performances spun with soft fiber, such as "Molly Darling," "Anytime," and "Bouquet of Roses," Arnold foraged into the mass, urban-based markets, clearing a path to country music's future viability.

In the 1950s and into the 1960s, Arnold strove to complete the transformation, to be known as something other than a hillbilly singer who occasionally crosses into the mainstream. "Eddy Arnold was going to have a new image—not a phony one, but a true image, as true as anything I could ever hope to be," he wrote in his autobiography. "People would know it and they would accept it."[1] With the assistance of his A&R man Steve Sholes at Victor Records and New York-based management (obtained after dumping huckster-ish manager Col. Tom Parker in 1953) the transformation began. He left the Nashville studios for New York, dropped the fiddles and steel guitar from his band, recorded with jazzy groups and large orchestral ensembles, and strove for television stardom.

Initially, the experiment failed, doused in the storm of rock and roll and stymied by Arnold's unease in a purely pop-oriented musical environment. He was more at home in Nashville, which was plain to hear on his sluggish renderings of "September Song" and other pop standards. "I think he was still basically a real true country singer," observed his 1950s arranger and comanager Charles Grean. "I don't think he could, even today, sing songs that are pop."[2]

Arnold found the anecdote to his 1950s doldrums when he steered his career back to Nashville. There, in the 1960s, RCA producer-guitarist Chet Atkins and arranger-conductor Bill Walker constructed a poporiented sound in the studio that melded beautifully with Arnold's country-hewn vocal style. A new career exploded like flood water over a levee, thanks also to his new manager:

aggressive Jerry Purcell, whose loud barking could intimidate the most unflappable of RCA officials. After years away from the top tiers of the country and pop charts, Arnold returned and, with Purcell's television and concert contacts, the singer became an international figure and a regular presence on network television.

The one time plowboy was forever established as a country-pop star, close to the goal he had set for himself in the 1950s. In conversation, he revels in his status, dwelling little on his setback in the 1950s. One might expect him, then, to deny his rural past. But this balladeer, who performed in a tuxedo for many years, speaks of his rural roots in great detail, although not with great passion. As a practical man's man might say, his rural roots are just part of who he became.

Dick Wright. That was my mother's father, and he came to live with us when I was a little boy. I became his pet. I'm serious about that, really his pet, because he was blind and I was his eyes. I led him everywhere he went. We had outside plumbing in the rural area. I led him to the toilet. I led him wherever he went. He was the jolliest old man. He had cataracts. If he was alive today, they would remove them and he could see.

He used to tell me stories. I just hope to live as long as he lived and be as good natured as he was. I used to play tricks on him. He'd sit on the front porch. People in the country sat on the front porch in a swing. Particularly in the spring and the summertime, he'd sit there because the poor old fellow was blind. He couldn't do anything else. I'd get out of the back part of the house and go down the little road that went up to the main road and then I'd walk into our house. He'd be sitting on the front porch and I'd change my voice. Of course, he was looking for somebody to come in and sit down and talk to him. I'd change my voice and say, "Hello Mr. Wright." He'd say, "Hello there. Come on in and sit down. Talk to me." Then I'd go in and he'd realize that it was me. Then he'd grab me, put me across his lap, and play spank. I'm sure I entertained him a lot by doing that. I played tricks on him, but he thought the world of me. Wherever he went, I went with him.

They told me when I was a boy that my Grandfather Wright fought for the South and my Grandfather Arnold fought for the South, but he had a brother who fought on the other side. But you know families were split over that war. It was the most useless war, probably, that's ever been fought. Anyway, they fought it. I made up my mind since I got older and did a lot of reading. I say, "Why did they fight and kill one another over this?"

You mentioned that you had outdoor plumbing. Did you have electricity?

No. Oh gosh, no. We had lamps that you'd put kerosene in. We called it coal oil. Our heat in our house was a wood heater. Not like the wood heaters that you can buy today that really put out a lot of heat. We didn't have a fireplace. We had this heater and stove pipes. They came down the chimney and then out of the wall. The stove pipes came down to the heater. We went to bed pretty early, bank the fire so you'd still have coals the next morning to start another fire, bank the coals with ashes. It was tough, but at that time I didn't realize how tough it was.

When you're a little boy, you don't know much about that. You grow up in it and it was part of life as far as I knew.

You had a windup Victrola.

Yes. Later on. That's where I heard a lot of music. I used to hear records by different people: Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Gene Austin, Kate Smith. Golly, I can't think of all of them, 78 records. I have now a windup record player like the one we had on the farm. It was a cabinet. My sister was older than me, and she went away to St. Louis and got her a job. She worked in a store in St. Louis called Famous Barr; it was a big department store in St. Louis. One Christmas she sent us that record player. We didn't have money to buy a record player. She sent us that record player: a Victrola.

Up until that, I had heard other people's [record players]. At a farmer's house, some of them might have a Victrola. Not all of them. I finally knew one man that got a radio. It had a battery in it, a great big battery. I'd go over there sometimes at night and listen to that radio. It was a real novelty.

I've read that you listened to Atlanta radio station WSB and heard Pete Cassell.

Yeah. And I listened to the Nashville station [WSM], and I listened to the Chicago station, WLS.

A woman who knew you in childhood told me, "He never would date nobody. He just dated that guitar."

That's right. I didn't have any money. I was embarrassed to date a girl. Until I got a little older, I didn't have any money to buy an ice cream cone. That's what you did then, go to Henderson to the drug store and get an ice cream cone. I wasn't a boozer. You didn't do those things then.

The same woman remembered you talking by the woodpile at school saying you were going to make some money with your voice and not farm anymore.

That's what I wanted to do because I couldn't see any future in being [a farmer]. I couldn't buy a farm. I had no money to buy a farm. All I knew to do was work. There was one family that lived on one side of us, the Stovall family. There were three daughters, and I used to help their father work on the farm, Mr. Joe Stovall. He was a good man. From time to time, he needed another man, another helper.

After my father died, they had an auction sale and auctioned off much of our implements. They auctioned off our cultivator. They auctioned off some of our mules, some of our cows, and we didn't have a cultivator then. Mr. Stovall had an extra two-horse cultivator. I bought it from him and paid him in labor for it, so we could cultivate a crop. In those days a two-horse cultivator was worth something to a farmer. I used to go help him work when I wasn't working at home, whatever he had to do, if he was hauling hay or if he was cutting firewood or fixing a fence or anything.

I was very good friends with Mr. Obe Latham and his sons. I used to go over and play with the Latham boys. That's where I was when my father died. I knew what was wrong. It was in the afternoon. The bell always rang for what we call

lunch, but in the country it was dinner. My mother rang that bell. It was a big bell. You always knew when dinner was ready. You'd work in the fields until that bell rang. When it rang in the afternoon, I knew it was my father because he was in bad health. He had high blood pressure. Of course, in those days they couldn't control it. They didn't have the medicines to control it. And I'm sure he worried a lot about his debts. That may have hastened [his demise].

Did the fact that the land wasn't in your family anymore sharpen your resolve to leave?

Didn't own it, and as I kept growing, I wanted to do something to earn a livelihood.

Somebody remembers you cutting hair and another remembers you selling Cloverine salve.

Yeah. I don't apologize for it. You'd sell anything to earn a dime. That all seems like a dream to me. I did. I'd do that. I'd work. When I got just a little older, I'd work in the summertime. I'd get a job cutting timber. I remember very well, I worked for a fellow that was cutting piling which was cypress timber and they made telephone poles out of it. It was cut off the place we lived on. It was in the swamps and they would dry up in the summer. Otherwise, you'd be in mud and water up to here. In the summer, you'd cut it, throw it, skin it to take the bark off, snake it out, that means drag it out. I did a lot of things like that. Anything to make a dime. It was just hard to get something to do.

It would take two men, another person and me. We were not the only ones down there cutting. There were other people cutting. When you're cutting a tree, and it's a high tree or any kind of tree, you got to know how to chip it down here to make it fall this way or that way. I learned how to do that. I was strong as an ox for a guy my size because I worked all the time.

A lot of people said that they were skeptical about you leaving and saying you were going to earn a living with your music. Were you aware of that?

I suppose they did. So many rural people have problems seeing past their nose. They don't know what's out there. I thought I knew what was out there. I went and seldom ever went back. I just went. I tried to send my mama money when I'd get a little money. My mother…I don't think she ever realized really what happened to me. I tried to tell her a couple of times. She lived with me. She died in 1950, and I was already earning a lot of money at that time on records, earning *a lot* of money in anybody's book.

At what age did you leave the farm and go to jackson?

I think about 18.

You sang on WTJS radio in Jackson.

There was an act down there. A fella by the name of Bill Wesbrooks had a little act that was on the radio everyday. This was after I'd been there one time. I went down there one time when I was going to school and our school went down and did a program on a Saturday. And then after that…. In the rural area, you always sit on the front porch and I did. And there was a man that came by selling subscriptions to the newspaper, the *Jackson Sun,* which owned the radio station.

The fella came by there selling, and I strummed him a little song. He invited me to come down and take an audition and I did and I went down there. Later on, I got a call from this fella Wesbrooks that was on that station because he had a little group. He wanted me to come down and join him, and I went down on that station. I got a little job and didn't make hardly any money. We'd do some little appearances and make a little money. But I got a job on the side there working in a funeral home which gave me a place to sleep. They had an ambulance service at that time. I did a lot of work on that extra. I got paid by the job…. I did more work on the ambulance than I did on the funeral side. In those days, the funeral homes owned the ambulances.

This was an ambulance that would pick up…

…people who'd been injured, a woman going to the hospital to have a baby, a woman going home from the hospital after having a baby.

There's a story about someone dying…

…in my arms. Oh gosh, yeah. A young fella that had shot himself. We got there before he died and we put him in the ambulance to take him to the hospital. I never forgot that. A young man like that. I'm serious. That shook me.

[The man who owned the funeral home] and I one day buried a man, just the two of us. A bum had died. We didn't know who he was. We had no name. There was no funeral, just Mr. Smith, George Smith [and I]. We buried that man, if you don't think that'll shake you up. Oh man…I'll tell you, it will make you think.

You must have gotten used to people being bloodied. At some point you get used to that.

I guess you would. That helped me along the way, I'll tell you. I helped haul more mothers-to-be to the hospital and mothers that had just had babies that came home. I did more of that and learned how to pick them up with another person. They taught me how to place your hands under their body, one man here, another man here to pick them up without hurting them.

You played in the morning on WTJS?

Usually around noon.

Would you get paid by the radio station?

Seems like very little. I might get a dollar or something, very little.

But you were able to get some money from gigs, people would write in for you.

We'd go out and do performances at schools and that kind of thing. We didn't play clubs; we didn't have that kind of group. It was more show, song, funny stuff, that kind of thing.

Can you recall the songs you would have done?

I used to sing a song that Gene Autry had. I know you never heard of it. Of course, I used to sing one he made popular called "Silver Haired Daddy of Mine." But he also had another one that I really liked, "If You'll Let Me Be Your Little Sweetheart."

How did you first meet your fiddler Speedy McNatt?

Oh! He lived out in Luray. His father had a little store out there. He came down and we both worked on [WTJS], and then we all went over to a station in