

Oral History Interview of Michael Martin Murphey

Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson

May 5, 2009

Horseshoe Bay, Texas

**Part of the:
*Crossroads of Music Archive***

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library



TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY
**Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library**

15th and Detroit | 806.742.3749 | <http://swco.ttu.edu>

Copyright and Usage Information:

An oral history release form was signed by Michael Martin Murphey on June 22, 2012. This transfers all rights of this interview to the Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University.

This oral history transcript is protected by U.S. copyright law. By viewing this document, the researcher agrees to abide by the fair use standards of U.S. Copyright Law (1976) and its amendments. This interview may be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes only. Any reproduction or transmission of this protected item beyond fair use requires the written and explicit permission of the Southwest Collection. Please contact Southwest Collection Reference staff for further information.

Preferred Citation for this Document:

Murphey, Michael Martin Oral History Interview, May 5, 2009. Interview by Andy Wilkinson. Online Transcription, Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library. URL of PDF, date accessed.

The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library houses almost 6000 oral history interviews dating back to the late 1940s. The historians who conduct these interviews seek to uncover the personal narratives of individuals living on the South Plains and beyond. These interviews should be considered a primary source document that does not implicate the final verified narrative of any event. These are recollections dependent upon an individual's memory and experiences. The views expressed in these interviews are those only of the people speaking and do not reflect the views of the Southwest Collection or Texas Tech University.

Technical Processing Information:

The Audio/Visual Department of the Southwest Collection is the curator of this ever-growing oral history collection and is in the process of digitizing all interviews. While all of our interviews will have an abbreviated abstract available online, we are continually transcribing and adding information for each interview. Audio recordings of these interviews can be listened to in the Reading Room of the Southwest Collection. Please contact our Reference Staff for policies and procedures. Family members may request digitized copies directly from Reference Staff.

Consult the Southwest Collection website for more information.

<http://swco.ttu.edu/Reference/policies.php>

Recording Notes:

Original Format: Born Digital Audio

Digitization Details: N/A

Audio Metadata: 44.1kHz/ 16bit WAV file

Further Access Restrictions: N/A

Related Interviews:

Transcription Notes:

Interviewer: Andy Wilkinson

Audio Editor: N/A

Transcription: Hudson Dougherty

Editor(s): Katelin Dixon

Interview Series Background:

The Crossroads Artists Project encompasses interviews conducted by the Crossroads of Music Archive Staff members. They hope to document the creative process of artists and songwriters from all across the Southwestern United States.

Transcript Overview:

This interview features singer/songwriter Michael Martin Murphey. Murphey discusses his background, career in songwriting with Screen Gems, and recording his own albums. Murphey also talks about writing a rock opera and his inspiration for the song, "Boy from the Country."

Length of Interview: 00:44:15

Subject	Transcript Page	Time Stamp
Calico Silver	6	00:01:40
Working at Screen Gems	8	00:11:22
Calico rock opera	10	00:16:42
Recording an album with Bob Johnston	13	00:23:35
"Boy from the Country"	17	00:35:43

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library

Keywords

cowboy music, cowboy poetry, musicians, prose and poetry, Texas music

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

So it's the fifth of May, Cinco de Mayo—

Michael Martin Murphey (MMM):

That's right, come to think of it.

AW:

—2009. This is Andy Wilkinson with Michael Martin Murphey, and we're in the Jim Bowie suite.

MMM:

At the Marriot Horseshoe Bay—

AW:

Yes.

MMM:

—in Horseshoe Bay, Texas, outside of Marble Falls.

AW:

This is a—I don't know about you, Murph, but this is pretty rich territory for me.

MMM:

It is. It may influence our interview here. It may add an aura of success that actually really isn't there, you know. Dr. Wilkinson and Michael Martin Murphey met in the Jim Bowie suite, at the (laughs) Horseshoe Bay Hotel. I can see this in a hundred years.

AW:

Yeah, people are saying, "I hope they're not saying Jim Boo-wie." Before I had to run down and get my recorder and cup of coffee, we were talking about some of my favorite of your writing, not to say recent writing is not a favorite too, but—

MMM:

Speaking of Jim Bowie, Natchez Trace, right?

AW:

Natchez Trace and also the calico silver project, and let's see the full name of that was "The Ballad of Calico."

MMM:

The whole project was called “The Ballad of Calico.” “Calico Silver” was a song.

AW:

Right. How did the “Ballad of Calico” come about?

MMM:

You know, I'd been—there's a whole lot of ways you can describe how something like that comes about, one of them would be, why you did it as a reaction to something else, so I'll cover that first. I was writing songs in a cubicle for Screen Gems Music and before that Sparrow music for five or six years out in California. I had started working for publishers from the time I pretty much hit California.

AW:

When did you get to California?

MMM:

1966. I went through two years at North Texas State University, graduated in '63. So I enrolled in September of 1966 at UCLA. From '66 until I moved back to Texas, I worked for Randy Sparks, Sparrow Music, and then I worked for Screen Gems, and I got the job at Screen Gems because Michael Nesmith from the Monkees recommended me and had recorded one of my songs. Anyway, I wrote songs in the cubicle, but I never was that successful, you know, but you've got to look at who my other people—who the other people in the other cubicles who were in that building—Neil Sedaka, Neil Diamond, Carole King, and Jerry Goffin, Berry Mann and Cynthia Weil. These were *the* pop song writers of the day; they were at the very top. They could go in there and sit down and come up with a great groove and a great lyric for a pop music song every single time. Meanwhile, I had grown up in Texas where, you know, to be a songwriter was an anomaly, it wasn't a business, and you were a rebel without a cause almost by being a songwriter. So I was modeling myself after the people whose records I had been given from the time I was young—was singing cowboy people, bluegrass people, Jimmie Rodgers, Woody Guthrie. My uncle was a big record collector, and he was no scholar or anything, he just loved music, he was a rancher and lived out on the old Blackland Prairie, you know, around Grand Prairie, and then later on, he went to Arkansas and had a ranch up there with my grandfather. He just loved “Blue Moon of Kentucky” and the “Yodeling Blues,” and there was a lot of stuff in there that even went back to some of the first—and from when he was a kid, some of the first old 78s that came out—they were Victrola types, they were the real thick ones, you know? There was stuff on there by Jules Verne Allen and—I didn't even know what I was listening to then, now that I know something about it, I go, Wow man I was listening to the masters. So I was very influenced by that, and so I get out to—I start writing songs in Texas, playing in coffee houses,

imitating those guys in the kind of songs that I wrote. I really liked the “Dust Bowl Blues” by Woody Guthrie, okay, so I’d try to write something like that.

AW:

So this is the early sixties you’re doing that?

MMM:

Yeah and late fifties, same kind of thing that Bob Dylan did. Bob Dylan basically listened to those forms—it’s almost like, you know, you’ve got your Petrarchan sonnet, you’ve got your Shakespearian sonnet, you’ve got a form to write into, we had a form that we could go by, and it was Dust Bowl, southwestern Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys singing cowboy yodeling brakeman form. It wasn’t like an R&B kind of groove thing that you wrote a song too. So I get out to LA, I’m going to UCLA, to help earn extra money, I’m working in folk music clubs, and I’m playing in honky-tonks when I got old enough, you had to be twenty one to really work at a club at that time in California, around there was drinking, so I started playing in honky-tonks. I’ve got all these songs but didn’t match the mold of a published singer/songwriter at the time, so it was only because of the bands I was in and Mike Nesmith getting a job as one of the Monkees, and we were friends from Texas.

AW:

I was going to say, if I remember correctly you told me once that you were high school pals, is that right?

MMM:

No. He was from San Antonio and I was from Dallas, but Mike, like me, got out and tried to do the Woody Guthrie thing even though we were actually kids living in the suburbs, but we went out and bought the work shirts and we scuffed up our boots and we got out on the long and lonesome highway, we’d throw the guitar case over our back and hitchhike to different gigs.

AW:

So you met him on those kind of gigs?

MMM:

With a Bogart-ed cigarette hanging that we rolled, hanging out of our lip, and if our parents found out about, they’d—and he was the son of a very wealthy family, but we met on folk music turf, and I had a place called the Wind Jammer Inn at seventeen which was a coffee house in McKinney Avenue that was put together as kind of a competitive coffeehouse to the Rubaiyat where I used to work because a lot of us got mad at Ron Shipman at that point because he was illegally putting liquor into the coffee and stuff over there, and we were afraid we would get in a lot of trouble, so we started like a real purist coffee house. Little did we know that there was no

way you could start a purist coffee house of any kind in those days, but the espresso was good, it was way better than Starbucks and way stronger. Okay to make a long story short, all of that comes into clash with getting a publishing job, and I had written this song Mike Nesmith liked it, "What am I Doing Hangin' Around," and he got into the Monkees, we were in the same band together, but he read *Variety* and went down there and did the audition, and the rest of us thought we were too cool to do that, you know—

AW:

This is out in LA?

MMM:

Yeah, and he got into the band and so did Peter Tork who was also in the same band I was in, and Dave, not Davey Jones, the other guy, gosh he'd kill me if he thought I forgot him, but we were in the Randy Sparks stable, they go off and get into the Monkees and become the biggest rock and roll band, outselling the Beatles. So to take care of their buddies who, you know, they didn't really owe us anything, we were stupid enough not to go to the audition, later on I'm glad I didn't after I saw what those guys went through, probably some of the most exploited entertainers that ever lived.

© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library

AW:

Really?

MMM:

Nesmith had a little bit more of a personal vision of the Monkees, it wasn't just a purely commercial project, you know, they were put together band, and Screen Gems totally controlled their material, he comes and says, "I want the Monkees to do some country stuff and I want to do, 'What am I doing hangin' around.'" I said, "Fantastic. That's great. I was already making fifty dollars a week working for Sparrow Music."

AW:

What were you doing with Sparrow?

MMM:

Writing songs.

AW:

Writing songs.

MMM:

But I was still a student at UCLA, and then Nesmith came along and said, "Well, they want to record this song, but you'll need to get out of your contract with Randy Sparks because Don Kirshner who ran Screen Gems at the time, he wants to control everything that the Monkees—it has to be a Screen Gems song, so I did get out of my contract with Randy Sparks, and "What am I doing hangin' around?" was an old song I had written way before I got out to California when I was a teenager. They cut this song, and it goes on an album that sells four million copies, and so now all of a sudden I've got a published song that's been on an album that sold four million, Kirshner calls me up and says, "I really want to sign you to a publishing contract and have you write songs, and I'll offer you more money than Randy Sparks," so I said, "Okay, I can get you on my contract." Now all of a sudden though I'm kind of expected to show up at Screen Gems building at Monday at eight o' clock every day and go through a week of writing songs in a cubicle, because that's what they did, they had a piano in there, or you brought in your guitar, you walk in there, you close the door, you didn't come out till lunch, and you sat there and you wrote, it was like being in a prison cell almost. I wasn't that good at it; I couldn't do it. I just—I would write songs that came from wherever they came from inside of me and just turned them in and just hope they could get it to somebody, you know. I had just a little bit of success at it. The other biggest thing that ever happened to me was they got "Boy from the Country" to John Denver, and that was my other big cut, but everything else was pretty minor. I had songs cut by rock and roll groups that even the busiest fanatical collectors of rock and roll history have probably forgotten, so when I finally decided to step away from that, I moved up into the hills in San Gabriel Mountains I was already headed back to Texas at that point sort of. I moved in the mountains, and I'm living up there in the mountains, and down below me is the Mojave Desert, and I've always loved getting together with old-timers ever since I've been a kid because my granddad was such a huge influence on my life and how I write songs and the stories that he told—he was from Kentucky, and he was from storytelling front porch culture that had lots of jokes and humor and great stories and tall tales, and I still wouldn't trade growing up, being around that as opposed to a heavily TV influenced culture. He listened to the grand old opry on Saturday night, but the rest of the time, he told stories and sang songs without any accompaniment on the front porch, and had a big influence on me. So I went down and I met this guy name Calico Cal who was an old man who lived out on the desert, and by Calico ghost town, and I became enthralled with this story of this ghost town, and I was writing songs with a guy named Larry Cansler, and Larry Cansler said, "Guess what Murph? I've got a job arranging songs for Kenny Rogers on his albums"—and it was Kenny Rogers and the First Edition then—"and I'm their arranger, you know, I do the string parts and stuff like that, and Kenny is kind of interested in 'Wildfire,' and he's kind of interested in a couple of other songs we've written." And I said, "Cool. It'd be great if he recorded one of our songs." So I put Warner Brothers—I put "Wildfire" with Warner Brothers, I think I sold it to them for a dollar, although you still got your writer's royalties, but the publishing royalties I basically gave up for a buck because I believed they were going to—well they never did place "Wildfire" with Kenny Rogers, and

Kenny Rogers dropped his interest in it, and I brought Larry a couple of songs I had written banging around out on the desert like, "Goodbye old—" Let's see, "Goodbye Old Desert" that came later, it was about Calico Cal, Calvin Black, and so I got out of the desert and I started getting fascinated with this Calico, and I realized that Calico was the basis of the whole state of California that John C. King, the most powerful governor in California, made all of his fortune from there, and a place where I was working, Knott's Berry Farm, was founded by one of John King's relatives, the money in the family, so I thought, Man this is just a great story, and boomtowns and ghost towns—the boomtown and ghost town thing always fascinated me as being a real dramatic thing, a town that rises up, a whole culture and community, and then twenty years it's gone, and when you're in California, you go and see a lot of those, and I had banged around California a good bit trying to get out of LA on the weekends, so I start writing these songs that try to tell the story of Calico, and I had written, (singing) "No rain and the weather got warm, broke down and I sold my farm, headed for the silver strike, took my wife, Calico silver gave me life, you could hear the miners singing"—basically about a hundred years before me, people would come out to California to make their fortune the same way I did, tried to do it on music. So the parallel to what was going on in culture and society at the time really fascinated me, but it was really a one song at a time thing, and I saw a little booklet about the dog in the town that everybody loved—that the postman Ned, Dorsey the Mailing-Carrying Dog, and all these other characters, and I begin to say, you know this is really kind of a—almost a—one of those rock opera kind of stories, and right around that time Bernie Taupin was writing things like, excuse me, who's the guy that wrote *Phantom of the Opera*? It was another English guy who did *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

AW:

Not Webber.

MMM:

Yeah, Andrew Lloyd Webber.

AW:

Oh, okay.

MMM:

He was really busy then, and he had *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Jesus Christ*—these concept albums were starting to come out that actually told a story, so I said, why not kind of a country rock version of that? So that's what *Calico Silver* became. Larry and I started working on it and having no idea where we were going to go with it, and then Kenny Rogers found out about it and said, "I want to do it. I want to put out one of those albums, so you guys get to work, and I'll give you some money, I'll give you an advance. I want to publish all this stuff. I'll just give you some money. You guys just go to work on that and don't do anything else." So there we

were, writing that, and we wrote that whole thing, and we had total artistic freedom because Kenny had said, ‘Write anything that you want. I don’t care what it is. I’m not going to criticize it. I’m not going to come in and tell you that that wouldn’t be the right song for Tom Jones.’” So we were totally free all of a sudden of the commercial shackles, and that was my first real excitement or comeuppance of free expression that I was going to really maybe have some artistic freedom, and that’s why that material sounds so effervescent I guess it is, so hopeful, so excited, even though it’s about a kind of a sad subject.

AW:

Yeah, yeah well, that’s—

MMM:

That’s kind of be the American story of trying to—

AW:

That’s your Celtic and you Irish roots that you’ve got to be happy about something sad or—

MMM:

Back in those days in the English department, which I was an English major, is like everybody was talking about the great American novel had never been written yet, who was going to write the great American novel, and I thought, Well I’m not a novelist, but I’m going to try to write the great American pop, rock, country opera, and the fact that it was so country, it had so many country elements in it, is kind of what blockaded the way of it really doing something on the pop charts in a very big way, but I came back to Texas several time and performed it, all of the piece myself. And oh my gosh people were so impressed, they thought that was something else. I was writing for Kenny Rogers, and I had this project, and that kind of got me going in the Texas music scene, and I hadn’t come home at that point, I realized as soon as I finished that project I was going to have to come home.

AW:

When you performed that material back in Texas, back here, how did people react to the material?

MMM:

They reacted better than to it than the Californians did because that was all about flower power and hippies and stuff, nobody wanted to hear about a ghost town, you know, what’s this? “Trigger Happy” was one of the songs, (singing) “Go in crazy cowboy, try to gun down the wind, you can’t find your enemies so you shoot down your friends.” People had no idea what I was talking about, but I was coming from a Texas place there, and dealing with the imagery of my backgrounds, so I found more acceptance as a writer in Texas for what I was talking about

because I was basically writing a western, then California which California was going through a period where every once in a while they'd make *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* or something, but we all knew that was a very Hollywood version of that story and didn't buy into it, although I was excited they were making westerns, but the westerns were few and far between, it was more about trying to make a commercial movie look like an art house movie in those days, so you had *Portnoy's Complaint* made into a movie starring some, whoever the beautiful babe and the great looking guy was of the day, so westerns were not real big, we got much more acceptance here, I think all of us at that point who came back to Texas—Willy came back from Nashville—people moved back because they felt really confined by the scene that they were in. There were no studios in Austin to speak of at that time that I even know of. Robin Hood Bryant had a studio over in the east Texas area, and the old studio that Buddy Holly recorded in was still over in Clovis, but there was no recording scene, we came back to perform live in venues where our fans accepted us as writing original material, you couldn't even do that in California even if you were a songwriter, when you went down to the local club to work, you better be singing a Beatles song or something, so we were playing copy radio stuff in the clubs and trying to write songs during the daytime, and we weren't getting a lot of sleep.

AW:

I would venture troubled sleep when you got it.

MMM:

Part of that was our fault too, some of the things we did was not because of writing or being tortured artists, we were having a lot of fun too, maybe too much fun.

AW:

Well, if you believe in Billy Joel Shaver you can't have too much of that.

MMM:

Well, I don't believe him.

AW:

I don't either. What year was it that you finished up the writing of "Ballad of Calico" and came to this epiphany that it was time to come back.

MMM:

C. S. Lewis said having too much fun is the basis of all perversion. Of anything you know what I mean?

AW:

I think that you saw my Billy Joe raised me a C. S. Lewis—I can't beat that.

MMM:

Go ahead.

AW:

Well, what year was it that you finished “Ballad of Calico” and started understanding this about yourself and about your music?

MMM:

'69-'70 and then I moved back to Texas in '71, and then by '72 I had *Geronimo's Cadillac* out. I had no idea that I'd ever get a record contract, I had given up on that in California, because again, you were playing copied music in a club so if talent scouts went out, they weren't looking for material, they were looking for somebody who looked the part that they would sign to a record deal, and I just didn't have—for whatever reason, I didn't have the hippie dippy kind of Donavan thing going on or the Beatle thing going on that other people did, I was still too much of a redneck, even though I had long hair and beard, I still wore cowboy boots all the time; I always wore a cowboy hat around, and people just didn't understand that. I got home and I felt like I was comfortable with being able to wear still the accoutrements of my culture, but be influenced by what I had learned out there, so I was a hybrid, I got back and went back and played a gig back at the old Rubyiat where I performed since I was a teenager because obviously I didn't have a club there anymore, and most of them had closed down, Ron Shipman was still running the Rubyiat, it had moved off of McKinney Avenue, no not yet, he hadn't moved off of McKinney yet, but he had actually gone from a garage, which was the original Rubyiat, to a bigger building on McKinney, and so Bob Livingston and I were playing, Bob was my bass player, and I met him in California—that's another part of the story we'll go into sometime—but I didn't meet him in Texas, but Bob and I were—he was playing bass with me, and I was doing a gig, I was doing all original material, in walks one night Bob Johnston who is Bob Dylan's producer—I didn't even know who he was, I had no idea who he was. He walks in and says, “I heard about you, and I just came over—I'm down for my dad's funeral over in Fort Worth, and I just had to get away from the whole dark, you know, grieving feeling that I have, so I thought I'd just go out and listen to some music, and I heard about you. I came over here to the club, and he said, “I like what I hear, and would you like to make an album?” And I said, “You've got to be kidding. When?” He said, “As soon as you can get to Nashville. I'm not doing anything for the next few weeks, come on up and lay some songs down.” I said, “You've got to be kidding.” He said, “Yeah, you and that bass player he plays pretty good. Just jump in a car and come up here.” We drove all night long that night. We got there, and I think I laid down forty or fifty songs, and we were totally exhausted, in fact I think I remember coming down with some kind of swelling lymph glad infection, you know one of those things you get when you're exhausted, because I had stayed up for days to get this dumb thing done. It was at Studio A at Columbia too, there I was me and my bass player out there in this warehouse of a giant room that they use for symphony recordings.

AW:

So the two of you were laying the pieces down without any—

MMM:

Well, he told us it was a demo, but they were laying it down on an eight track machine, I mean, everything I had work with out in LA was a three track or a four track, this was the new eight tracks, but we didn't know that, we just were out there recording and then we noticed that the tape was bigger and all that, and I said, "That's cool, does it sound better?" And he said yeah, so we got done, he said, "Well, listen to the demos, Bob, and then you're the producer so you pick out whatever you think we should do," because he did not interrupt us, he never said do it over, he let us decide if we wanted to do it over, he never influenced us about a lyric or anything. After it was over, I said, "Well when do you want to pick out some stuff and have us come back?" He said, "You just did it." I said, "What do you mean I just did it?" He said, "You just did it, you just laid down everything I need, I'm going to overdub everything else on the album." I said, "You mean you're going just get other people in here and add to the record?" He said, "Yeah, but I'll send you tapes, and if you don't like what I do, you can do it over, or when I get down to actually doing it, you can come up here." So I was there for about three fourths of it, I brought Leonard Arnold up and Gary Nunn to sing harmony on the record, but he left Livingston's bass part on for the whole—and started overdubbing all these others players, and I think even Bob even played a little bit on the record, and that was Bob Johnston's methodology, he never ever interfered with his artists. By the way, he lives in Marble Falls now.

AW:

He does?

MMM:

Yeah, be a great a guy for you to interview soon. He's a Texan. Bob Johnston is a Texan.

AW:

Oh I'd love to; I'd love to interview him. That album, while we're talking about it, I bought it when it first came out and I didn't have any idea who you were, I don't even know how I knew about the record. I didn't know—Bob I found out later I knew Bob Livingston because we'd grown up in the same town, but I had no idea, but I started playing that record, and it was one of those, I'm not saying this to make you feel better.

MMM:

I need for people to say things to make me feel better right now. I just drove 550 miles from Denton, Kansas to here.

AW:

It's one of those albums—

MMM:

Go ahead, blow smoke in my ear.

AW:

It's like *Sergeant Pepper* or it's like the Rolling Stones' *Get Live if You Want it*, or it's like the first time I ever heard the Everly Brothers. It's one of those things that just stands out in your memory. But more importantly, I go back and listen to that album right now, and it's every bit as fresh as it was then, and I don't know how y'all did that. I mean that's amazing.

MMM:

Well, that's nice for you to say; it isn't to me.

AW:

Well, you've been singing it for thirty-something years, but for me to listen to it, and from a recording point of view, and from a selection of the material and the performances on it, I listen to it, and it just, I think that is—it's sort of a key piece, and in my own mind, I think about—I know you recorded it in Nashville—but to me that starts my idea of modern Texas music.

MMM:

Well, Bob Johnston was a Texan, he was attracted to me because I was a Texan and because a lot of my material was very Texas based, not that I mentioned Texas every five minutes, you don't have to do that to be a Texas songwriter; it's an amalgam of things that exist in Texas that don't quite exist anywhere else, an influence of blues, Latino music, and Celtic music, the cross patterns of that is what makes Texas music—same thing that makes cowboy music, cowboy music is a combination of those three things, Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, extremely influenced by black music, and yet "Rose of San Antone," you know what I mean? So there's these strings in there that you grow up with that you just get them inside you. He was the kind of guy, though, that would say to Leonard Cohen, "Just come in and play your songs," he'd never stop him, he might do four or five takes if Leonard wanted to do it. Bob Dylan, he made *Nashville Skyline* in twenty four hours, from the time that Bob came in, the time that the album was mixed and set to New York was twenty-four hours. And you listen to his albums now, *Folsom Prison* was another album he produced, a lot of Cash records, he never stopped people and said, "You're singing out of tune," you were allowed to sing out of tune, if you listen to *Geronimo's Cadillac* there's stuff on there that they'd never allow today because we have these tune-i-laters—I call them tune-i-laters now—they have a way of going in and altering your vocal to match the pitch of the track of that particular chord, and it sounds wonderful, but it sounds wonderful all the time, it never sounds human to me, so now although I've gone through a phase

where I used the tune-i-later for a while, I now don't do it. I now just keep doing it over again till I get it right.

AW:

But you sing in tune as well as anybody I know, I hear you live.

MMM:

And I think if I ever get to the point where I don't sing in tune, and I don't have a good ear, I'll use the tune-i-later again, you know what I mean? Roy Rogers—I can remember when Roy Rogers came back and made an album in Nashville around the time that cowboy music sort of had a little revival, Roy came back and made an album, and he wore two hearing aids, and when he heard, he didn't want to do it at first, they said Roy, you know, said, "I can't really sing in tune anymore. I really can't hear." They said, "Don't worry about it, we'll fix it." Roy said, "You can, really? Okay." And the record's wonderful because Roy's voice still sounded great, he just didn't have good pitch, so, heck I'll use that tool to make music if I have to, but the *Buckaroo Blue Grass* album is a cut live with the band deal, and then I went back in and fixed some things where I sang out of tune, but I didn't, I never used the tune-i-later.

AW:

Well, seriously how, I hear you play—

MMM:

You know what? You know what the tune-i-later will do? It will fix things like this, (sings) "All around the Natchez Trace now" will come out (sings in higher pitch) "All around the Natchez Trace now."

AW:

Yeah, it fixes the slides.

MMM:

It won't even let you do a slide sometimes, so you still have to fix those things even if you're using one.

AW:

Yeah, I know I listened—sometimes I'm sure they've slipped things past me, but when I've—you can kind of hear them when they're using that machine. All that aside, would you talk a little bit about—

MMM:

I was just trying to say I really lucked out, okay, now that I'm a conservative Christian, I say I was blessed, I got the guy that let an artist do whatever he wanted and pick whatever material he wanted and say it anyway that you wanted, and that's what Bob's entire reputation was on. He produced Flatt and Scruggs, you know what he did? He brought Flatt and Scruggs in and set up some microphones, turned on the machine, and said, "Go boys!" Turn it off, mix it, that's it, send it in.

AW:

As you say that take something of both wisdom and courage.

MMM:

He was the most hated producer at CBS, but he had so much success, they couldn't do anything about it, but they hated the fact that he let the artist have that much latitude.

AW:

Really? That's sad; that's really sad. Tell me, you mentioned that "Boy from the Country" was an older song, I've always been very interested in that song from a couple of perspectives. Other than the fact that I like the song a lot, it's an interesting topic first of all to be writing a song about, and the second thing is that the chord progression and the melody, the way that you put that together is a very interesting piece, how did that song come about?

MMM:

Well, I had the guitar part before I had the song, I really truly believe as a songwriter for me, and this is not true because I think there's no rules, there are things you can do like in writing to—if you know the disciplines of writing and you know the forms of writing, then you can start to break the rules, but I don't think there's ultimately any rules. I had this guitar thing I was messing with, a finger picking piece, and I had most of the licks down, but I had no idea what I was going to sing to it, but I think it all starts with a melody anyway, if you don't have a strong melody, you don't really have much of a song in the long run. If you take a poem and try to put a melody to it, to me that's always been limited success for me to do that, it always comes out sounding like something else I've heard before, but when you say, Oh, this really sounds great as a melody, and these chords really are cool, then you can kind of say, well what does that say to me, what am I going to say, what am I going to layer over that? I had been reading a book about Saint Francis, it was actually G. K. Chesterton's book about Saint Francis that I think is one of the greatest books ever written about Saint Francis's life, and the song is my reaction to reading that book basically, and I wrote it, I dedicated it to my brother because my brother was the quieter of the two brothers, very introspective, he was an actor and when he got on stage, he just could do anything, but when he was off stage, very introspective; that works out good for really good actors because they need a lot of time alone to memorize lines, and he would walk through

the woods, so in him I kind of saw a Saint Francis type character—he had that in his soul, Saint Francis walking off into the woods. And at the time, I was reading a lot of comparative religion stuff and reading about other religions, and I realized that all the founders of great religions were either country boys or they got back to the wilderness before they finally got the vision—they got back to the land. In the sixties, in the early sixties and late sixties, the Whole Earth catalog came out, and everybody was trying to get back to the land that the hippies were all about, I don't think it was to grow corn, though, I think it was to grow marijuana. They were—before, their dads were trying to grow corn and make liquor, getting back to the land, but all kidding aside, there was a kind of a back to nature pastoral kind of movement within the hippie movement that was more peaceful and wasn't about students for a democratic society and radicalism, I was much more attracted to that part of the movement, but I began to realize, Buddha goes off and sits under a tree in the jungle and has his vision, and even Mohammed says, "Screw you guys here in the big city, I'm getting out of here, I don't want to trade with you guys anymore I've had enough." And he goes out on the desert, and beyond desert, eating figs and dates and living off the land that he gets this vision of fire and jihad, we've got to purify these people, they don't really know God. One example like that—and that was only a few major religions, but all the major big ones—pretty much all say Jesus at some point has got to go to the wilderness and completely—and his prophet that comes before him is a hair-shirt, wild eyed man living off of locusts, and this seems to be where the revelation comes from, not from culture, not from the Greeks' vision of a democratic society.

AW:

Well even Hesiod, though, saw the muses when he was tending his flock of sheep.

MMM:

Well, it's all about agriculture in all the Greek and Roman mythology—theology the way they saw it—it's really all about the land and the fecundity of the land and all that. So what occurred to me was the boy from the country goes off into the woods and becomes kind of a different kind of rebel, not a rebel against the political system but a kind of rebel of a way of life, and that's what we're—he ultimately is the prophet we listen to, which is kind of why I explained why cowboy music has survived over many—over long time because people are still listening to that prophet from out there somewhere, the guy that's close to the land, it's why they liked Will Rogers a lot better than they liked the philosophers of the day, they would rather read Will Rogers's column than Will Durant.

AW:

Interesting pairing of the two Wills.

MMM:

My dad read both, that's what I was exposed to. My dad didn't even have a college education, but my dad had so many books about mythology and world history and stuff, for an accountant who was a comptroller in the navy, that's pretty amazing, so that's the origin of that song, and every line is a permutation of that idea.

AW:

It's a terrific song, and it's interesting to me that the melody came first; it sounds to me like they came up together, they work so well, the lyric and the melody and those chord changes.

MMM:

I don't know about you, but I'm pretty sure you'd agree with me on this, musically we come from a front porch culture pretty much. Where do you play the guitar? You don't play inside, you go out and sit on the front porch and you look over the land and you write, and that's always been the way I've best been able to write. I cannot write in the cubicle; I couldn't do well. Here I've got a view here, and I can sit there in that chair with a guitar and all of a sudden things start to come to me, you know, I think that's why I've always kind of remained in spirit a cowboy singer and a country boy because I think that that's where the basis—Allan Savory said it best, "Civilization fails when its agriculture fails, soon as agriculture starts to fail, that civilization's going down."

AW:

Yeah, and not just because they don't have anything to eat.

MMM:

How much respect do we have for our agriculture right now?

AW:

Yeah, exactly. Buck Ramsey talked a whole lot about the sanctity of the cowboy calling in the preservation of that spirit, the same thing that you're saying, he just put it in a little different words.

MMM:

Excuse me for a minute.

AW:

Sure.

MMM:

We probably should leave in about five minutes, Andy.

AW:

Okay I'm going to shut the tape off then, and we'll take this up later.

End of interview



© Southwest Collection/
Special Collections Library