

## Cowboy Jack Clement – “Guess Things Happen That Way” Interview

### Part 2 – About the songs - originals, co-writes and covers

*In last week's episode, Cowboy Jack Clement talked about making the album “Guess Things Happen That Way.” This week, we look at the songs on the album. Many thanks to Kissy Black at Dualtone for setting up the interview.*

**Folk Wax :** The opening track is “No Expectations.” Where had you heard the song back in the seventies.

**Cowboy Jack Clement :** Jim Rooney is the one that came up with that arrangement [**Ed. Note.** Working out of Cowboy Jack Clement's Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa, Rooney produced albums by Nanci Griffith, Iris DeMent, Dave Mallett and John Prine]. The Rolling Stones play the song real slow. Totally different from the way I do it. Rooney did it pretty rocking, like I do, and it was always a good song to warm up the band with. It sort of evolved into the theme song for our band.

**FW :** Do you mean the original late seventies version of Cowboy's Ragtime Band.

**CJC :** No, the new one. I've been singing that song for years and I recorded that track, I don't know, maybe fifteen years ago, during a demo session one day. Different people would come in and I'd have them overdub something. Like that electric guitar on the track, it's a black guy called Moses Dillard who is deceased now. He died ten years ago. There are two or three basses on it. One of them is a black guy named Jesse Boyce. I hadn't touched it for years but I'd play it for people and everybody liked it. I always said I was going to cut a new vocal, which I did earlier this year. It's a fun song.

**FW :** You once cut “No Expectations” with Johnny Cash, and the track that follows “Guess Things Happen That Way” is one of two # 1 Country hit singles, on the album, that you penned and Cash cut back in the days when you were working at Sun Records. The other # 1 song is “Ballad Of A Teenage Queen.” What do you recall of writing those songs. Did they come to you quickly.

**CJC :** Pretty quick actually. I really wasn't thinking about Johnny Cash when I wrote either one of them. In the case “Ballad Of A Teenage Queen” I would go in and record a solo single myself, every once in a while. I had recorded the song, with the vocal group just like Cash did it. He heard my version, and wanted to record it and I figured “*Hell I can make some money doing that,*” so I let him do it. I never regretted it. He cut it like my arrangement, and I actually played the guitar on his version, the same way I played it on mine.

**FW :** It crossed my mind that you possibly included “No Expectations” and the two # 1 hit singles, as a fond remembrance of him.

**CJC :** It really didn't have anything to do with the fact he's gone. It's just that we had those songs. I had got him to come over to the house here about a year ago, and put his voice on “Guess Things Happen That Way.” He's on a track by himself. I just put him in there, and you can hear it if you know it's there. He makes some cute little comments at the end that I had him do – he says, “*I don't like, I don't like it, I love it.*” “Ballad Of A Teenage Queen” was originally my record, and he was guesting on a session I did, back in 1981. It laid around here all this time, and when I was putting this album together I listened to it, and it was better than I thought it was, and he was singing good - and I was singing pretty good. I got Kenny [Malone] to play a little drums – very lightly, and I added a ukulele. That was about it. Those are the original vocals on that cut.

**FW :** So those tracks weren't a tribute.

**CJC :** I think I would have done it either way. Of course every time I sing one of them songs, or think of one of them songs, I think of him. We were dear friends and I miss him every day.

**FW :** On the album, there's another famous song you composed in the nineteen-fifties, “It'll Be Me.” It started life as the B-Side of a # 1 Country hit single for Jerry Lee Lewis.

**CJC :** And a # 1 rock'n'roll hit. Country too.

**FW :** What do you recall of cutting “It’ll Be Me” with Jerry Lee almost fifty years ago.

**CJC :** I never did like his version of it. He was reading it off a lyric sheet when we cut it. We cut it twice. I engineered it one time, and then Sam engineered it [**Ed. Note.** Sam is Sam Phillips, the owner of Memphis based Sun Studios and Sun Records]. My version was the one that was on the single, but then later on we put the other one on an album. They were both kind of good – a little different. I still think mine had a little more bounce to it. Neither one of them was what I wanted to hear.

**FW :** There’s a couple of songs on the album that you co-wrote with Don Robertson. Tell us about him.

**CJC :** I first met him back in the late sixties, when he was visiting and hanging out in Nashville. He stayed with a friend of mine, Jim Malloy, who used to be my main engineer at RCA. We were neighbours, and he introduced us. We started hanging out and then one time Don came to Nashville and stayed a month and we wrote a song called “Does My Ring Hurt Your Finger.” Charley Pride cut it, but since I was a BMI writer, and he was ASCAP, and you couldn’t mix them back in those days, I just went ahead and put my wife’s name on it. Anyway we got to be buddies, and I would go visit him every time I went to California. Six or seven years ago, he moved to Nashville for a couple of years. During that time we wrote six or seven songs together. He’s a real fun guy. He’s a teetotaler now, but he’s still fun. When he used to drink, he was a ball of laughs. He used to perform and made a few records for RCA. He’s an amazing writer and has written all kinds of stuff like “Please Help Me I’m Falling,” “Hummingbird” and “Born To Be With You,” and a number of hits for Elvis. There’s also an instrumental he wrote called “Happy Whistler” [Jack hums the melody] – and “I Really Don’t Want To Know,” just a whole ton of great songs. He’s a great melody guy.

**FW :** There’s a cover of Allen Reynolds “Dreaming My Dreams With You” on your album. That’s another song that you’re associated with, because Waylon Jennings cut it on an album you produced.

**CJC :** I always loved the song. I’ve been singing it for years. I used to publish the song, back when I cut it with Waylon. I don’t publish it anymore, but that ain’t got nothing to do with it, I still love the song. I wanted to sing it, so I did. Mostly on this album I sing stuff I wanted to sing.

**FW :** Allen Reynolds is someone who you literally mentored at the outset of his career.

**CJC :** Yeah, we go all the way back to Sun Records. He was about nineteen at that time and going to college. I was producing some stuff with Dickey Lee at Sun Records and Allen was singing in his vocal group, The Collegiates. Even after I left Sun, the three of us would hang out – I was married at the time and they were single. We’d have a lot of cook-outs at my house in Memphis, write songs and then I’d published them. Next, I moved to Beaumont and built a studio. A few months later they came down, and we cut a big hit with Dickey called “Patches.” Dickey wrote a thing called “She Thinks I Still Care” which I got cut by George Jones. Allen wrote a bunch of stuff, and we did very well with them as writers and me as publisher, for a long time. I moved them to Beaumont, after I’d been there, oh, less than a year. They stayed two or three years. When they went back to Memphis, I came to Nashville. About a year later, I had things going pretty well so I hired them as songwriters and moved them to Nashville.

**FW :** What did you think when you first heard Allen’s “Dreaming My Dreams Of You.”

**CJC :** It was very special to me. It was very personal. That song is about what was happening in our lives at that time. Allen was getting a divorce. I’d started this record label, and it was kind of coming apart because I’d forgotten to sign Don Williams to a contract [**Ed. Note.** The label was JMI Records]. Things were sort of coming unglued. He wrote the first verse of that song, and a month or so later he was driving to the beach in South Carolina, and that verse came to him – *“But I won’t let it change me not if I can, I’d rather believe in love, And give it way as much as I can, To those I’m fondest of.”* That verse always hit me between the eyes - or between the ears. I always loved the song and it’s a beautiful melodic thing. It sounds good with accordions and stuff. I like accordions.

**FW :** “Every Place I’ve Ever Been” was written by you and a Democrat from Georgia. In fact, Zell Miller is currently the Senator for Georgia.

**CJC :** He and I are big buddies. I met him about a month after he became Governor of Georgia. That must have been about twelve or thirteen years ago. I was down there singing at the Governor’s Mansion.

It turned out Zell Miller was a big fan of mine and had bought my first album when it came out. He always knew what songs I wrote. He's a huge country music fan. He knows more about George Jones than I do. We hit it off immediately. I was sitting at the table with him before I got up and sang, and asked "*How do you like it so far*" – meaning about being Governor, and he said "*Well, I could do without it.*" He had me hooked from then on. I wound up going down there many times while he was Governor. In fact I spent more nights in the Governor's Mansion during that eight years, than anybody but him and his wife. I took a bunch of people down there and did shows in his ballroom. Zell was here in the house about a week before he became Senator. He was sort of retired at the time and happy as a lark. That song is about him. It's his story. He always wanted to go back home to the mountains of Northern Georgia. He came up with that line "*Every place I've ever been has been was on my way back home.*" One time I was down in Atlanta and he took the morning off and we went into his den and started writing that song.

**FW :** Did I misjudge "Drinking Carrot Juice," because I thought it was a little whimsical.

**CJC :** Yeah, I would say it's a little whimsical. I've always written novelty songs. For instance "I've Been Flushed From The Bathroom Of Your Heart," "Dirty Old Egg Sucking Dog" and "The One On The Right, Is On The Left." At the time I wrote the song, I was drinking carrot juice. I found out if you want the juice to be really fresh you've got to make it every day. You got to get these carrots and scrub them down real good. It makes a mess, but you need to do it every day or that stuff will sit in the refrigerator and congeal. I was getting my wife at the time to make that stuff, and she hated it. Anyway, that was back in the seventies when I wrote that thing. I'd whip it out and play it for somebody every once in a while. That's one of the favourite songs on the album I think.

**FW :** The closing track on the album "Off To Join The World" was written by Shawn Camp [and Mark D. Sanders]. Lyrically that song also possesses a degree of whimsy.

**CJC :** Yeah, well – I had cut that song with Shawn. I thought "*Well, I could sing that.*" I asked Shawn if it would be alright if I did. He said "*Sure.*" First of all I was going to put my voice on his track that I had cut with him. Then I decided, "*I'll just cut my own.*" I was going to lower the key. Shawn sings it in A, and I was going to do it in G. Then I decided I ought to do it in A, and I ought to just go ahead and cut my own track, which I did.

**FW :** The last song that I was going to ask about was the one you co-wrote with Mike Elliott. It has a real country music title, "Leavin' Is The Lovin' Thing [To Do]." There's a jazz guitarist from Chicago with that name. Is that the guy you wrote the song with.

**CJC :** Yeah. He's from Minneapolis actually. He lived in for, I don't know, eight or ten years. We used to work a lot together on stuff. One time I got him to teach me a bunch of jazz chords. I don't know, he wrote a little of the melody on that tune. That was sometime in the nineties. A lot of these songs have been sitting around, because I haven't been very active as a publisher in a while. I always thought that song could be a hit for somebody.

Arthur Wood.  
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## **Cowboy Jack Clement Interview – Addendum to Part 2 [Folkwax Issue # 188]**

Last Thursday following the appearance of Part 1 of the Cowboy Jack Clement interview in Folkwax, I received E-Mails from Joe Gracey and Terry Clarke commenting on the article. They demonstrated [to me] the power of music to connect people. Joe Gracey is based out of Austin, Texas and I had contacted him earlier that day regarding his wife's, Kimmie Rhodes, latest solo album "**Windblown**" [which we'll review in Folkwax ere long]. Joe's initial message included "*I just got through reading your Cowboy interview. He's a gas...I've known him since the early 70s and at one point he was going to produce a record on me, before I lost my voice*" [Ed. Note. Throat cancer robbed Joe of his voice]. My reply of "*So, you're a fan,*" brought the tribute, "*Not only am I a fan, I consider myself to be a graduate of the Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa school of Production and Engineering. Jack is the most important mentor I have ever had, bar none. Meeting him literally changed the course of my life..*" Singer/songwriter Terry Clarke has English and Irish blood coursing through his veins, currently resides in Scotland, loves Austin,

Texas, and possesses the soul of a poet sent the following, *"Study your rock 'n' roll history books, L.P. sleeve notes, CD booklets...and Jack Clement's name is writ large. From the genesis to the present, Memphis with Sam Phillips and Sun Records, with Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Waylon Jennings...engineering, producing, writing, playing that rhythm guitar style of his. Joe Gracey in Austin - who is one of the greatest rhythm guitar players I know - told me once that Cowboy Jack taught him to play. Watching Jack perform at Douglas Corner in Nashville one night was an object lesson in how to write, sing and play music. Still a handsome man with thick, swept back silver hair he took the stage and illustrated why I fell in love with this music as a 10 year old boy."* The foregoing? - proof, as if it was needed, that we live in a small world.....