

MICHAEL MARTIN MURPHEY      Part II  
FROM AUSTIN TO LIBERTY

In issue Number 5 (March 3rd-16th), I traced Michael Murphey's early life from his birth in Dallas, Texas, through his college years at North Texas State, to becoming a member of the Lewis and Clarke Expedition, and then working as a contract writer for Screen Gems in Los Angeles. At the close of Part I, Michael had returned to Texas settling initially on lake Travis, near Austin. The year was 1971.

Bob Johnston <sup>had</sup> initially worked as a staff producer for CBS, and through the Sixties he established a reputation for working with singer/songwriters. [He produced six albums for Bob Dylan including, the eponymous 'Nashville Skyline', 'electrified' Simon and Garfunkel's folk-tinged songs and took more than a passing interest in the recording/performing career of the Canadian novelist/poet, Leonard Cohen.]

By the early seventies, Johnston was working as an independent producer and although he recorded groups like The Band and Britain's own Lindisfarne, he always sought out new solo performers. In 1971, while visiting his folks who lived in Fort worth, Johnston caught one of Michael's solo performances and was smitten by the young Texan's work.

A recording deal with A&M Records was arranged and the first album, titled 'Geronimo's Cadillac' was recorded at Johnston's old stomping ground, Columbia Recording Studios in Nashville. Strings recorded in London were later added to the basic tracks and the album was released in 1972. [Neil Wilburn, who later produced Guy Clark's first three solo albums, worked as the studio engineer on the album.]

Although the album sold well in Texas and the South Western States, A&M failed to break the album on a national level. The title track with its subject of the injustices shown to the American Indian, remains one of Murphey's best known songs. [Numerous versions by artists such as Hoyt Axton, Cher and that Middlesborough lass, Claire Hamill, were recorded in subsequent years.]



Many of the songs on the album have a Gospel feel to them, undoubtedly a result of <sup>Michaels</sup> religious upbringing. Standout tracks are, 'Backslider's Wine', 'Boy from the country' and Roy Lewis' 'The lights of the City', the only non-Murphey composition on the album. Of the remaining eleven songs, Murphey wrote five himself and shared the remaining writing credits with, [poet and friend Charles John Quarto, Larry Cansler, (with whom he had written the 'Ballad of Calico' suite), fellow Austin musician Craig Hillis and Boomer Castleman from the Lewis and Clarke Expedition.] OR [various other writers.]

Among the musicians who worked with Michael on the album were, Gary P. Nunn and Robert Livingston, later to form part of the Jerry Jeff Walker's mid Seventies backing group, the Lost Gonzo Band. The rather rough quality of Michael's vocals on the 'Geronimo's Cadillac' album were partly due to the fact that while the album was being recorded, he was recovering from a stomach ulcer.

Late in 1972 Michael spent a mere four days recording his second album, (one day longer than Geronimo's Cadillac), at Ray Steven's Sound Lab in Nashville. Johnston was retained as producer, (in fact he stayed for Michael's following three albums), and the Nunn/Livingston band nucleus was augmented by Craig Hillis, Herb Steiner and Michael McGeary. The album, titled, 'Cosmic Cowboy Souvenirs' was released early in 1973, and did feature on the Billboard Top200, albeit briefly. The idea for the title song, 'Cosmic Cowboy', an anthem to the burgeoning contemporary country scene, came to Michael after playing a date at the Bitter End in New York.

Michael premiered the second album, (and incidentally the follow up), at the now defunct Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin. True to the musical tangents with which he had begun to indulge himself, the concert included backing by a classical string quartet. Capers like this made it an indisputable fact that, as well as his basic country roots, Murphey acted as a sounding board for a multitude of other musical influences.



The symphonic and slightly strange 'Prometheus Busted' and the polynesian influenced, 'Honolulu' on the second album <sup>certainly</sup> attested to that. Michael even found time to recall his ulcer in the lyrics of the song, 'Blessing in Disguise'. Michael composed all nine tracks on the album, including one song each co-composed with Messrs Nunn and Quarto.

In the spring of that year Michael made his only British concert appearances to date, at Ronnie Scott's club in London. His backing band featured John D. Souther, Don Henley (from the Eagles), Dave Jackson and Gary P. Nunn. [There is a little doubt in my mind, that the visit influenced the latter musician to compose that Texas anthem and all-round great song, 'London Homesick Blues'. Anyway I digress.] During his sojourn on this side of the great Pond, Michael also found time to visit Ireland, his ancestral home.

When A&M were offered Murphey's third album they turned it down, despite Johnston's considerable clout in the music business. Another deal was soon arranged Stateside with Epic Records, although the album was released by EMI in this country. [In fact, Michael's first two albums had been released in Britain by that company, the first on their subsidiary label, Regal Zonophone.]

By 1974 when, 'Michael Murphey' was released, the Gonzos had departed but Hillis was still around and he provided one of his own songs, 'Good ol' natural habits' and co-wrote another with Michael. Of the remaining 8 tracks Michael wrote six songs himself, the remaining two being shared with Boomer Castleman. Songs like the gospel based 'Holy Roller' and the ballad, 'Healing Springs' children's choir and all, and the rocking, 'Ace in the hole', made for a strange mix on the album, although personally, I still feel the album was as valid as the first two.

Michael's marriage to his English born wife Diana had broken up by late '73, and he married his second wife, Caroline, a native of Dallas, prior to the release of the third album. [Caroline,



a teacher of mentally retarded children is featured <sup>in the photographs</sup> on the back cover of the 'Michael Murphey' album, ~~as~~ is his son Ryan. ] 'Michael Murphey' like its predecessors failed to amass large sales and time has proved it to be the last album to have a slightly gospel flavour.

'Blue sky - Night Thunder' released in 1975, musically and lyrically marked a rekindling of Michael's interest in the life of the American Indian, past and present. In the summer of 1975, Michael finally struck gold, when the single, 'Wildfire' peaked at No2 for two weeks on the Billboard charts, [eventually selling in excess of two million copies. Michael had co-written the song with Larry Cansler.] The album eventually went gold and the follow-up single, 'Carolina in the Pines' <sup>made the</sup> also charts. Two of the songs, 'Medicine Man' and 'Secret mountain hideout' were co-written with a new partner, Jac Murphy. Although Gary Nunn was now working with Jerry Jeff Walker, Michael included his old friend's song, 'Rings of life' on the album.

I suppose the old Tin Pan Alley adage of, 'Record another one, just like the other one', is as valid today as it was in the late Fifties. It certainly seemed so in late 1975, when 'Swans against the Sun' appeared. Although it was the last album that Bob Johnston was to produce, it was the second album Michael had recorded at the Caribou Ranch in Nederland, Colorado, with Jeff Guercio as studio engineer.

[There is certainly some significance in the fact that Michael had released two albums in one year - 'Wildfire' had undoubtedly created an urgency to record more hit songs.]

[Although Michael had initially embraced the burgeoning Austin Music Scene of the early to mid Seventies, he eventually ostracised himself. This was due, as much as anything, to the sometimes unacceptable <sup>which he presented</sup> onstage persona, to his fans. The net result, was that by 1975 Michael had moved his base to Colorado.]

The musicians backing Michael on, 'Swans against the Sun' read like a Who's Who of contemporary musicians, and included Charlie Daniels, John Denver, Jim Guercio (sometime Beach Boy, manager of .....



Chicago and owner of <sup>the</sup> Caribou Ranch), Willie Nelson, plus Jeff Hanna and John McEuen from the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

'Renegade' made No39 on the Singles charts in February 1976 while the album reached a respectable No44. Michael included a couple of songs by other writers on 'Swans against the Sun'. 'Mansions on the Hill' by Hank Williams and Fred Rose plus, 'Buffalo Gun' by Richard Dean. While Michael continued his working relationship with Jac Murphy on a couple of songs, the album <sup>also</sup> included an old Screen Gems' composition, 'Seasons Change', and Charlie Quarto re-appeared; providing the lyrics for 'Rhythm of the Road'.

Later that year Michael completed his trilogy of albums loosely based on the life of the American Indian, when 'Flowing Free Forever' was released. The album was recorded partly at Caribou and at Applewood Studios in Denver, with production shared by Michael and Jeff Guercio. Although the album wasn't rated <sup>very highly</sup> by reviewers at the time of its release, there are many redeeming songs on 'Flowing Free Forever', including one of my all time Murphey favourites, 'See how all the horses come dancing'. Michael even paid homage to his old partner <sup>Steven</sup> Fromholz by recording the song, 'High Country Caravan'. Of the remaining songs, Michael wrote four and shared one composing credit each with Michael McKinney and Steve Weisberg. The closing song on side one, 'Yellow House' was composed by Sam Broussard.

Lack of sales were clearly a motivation to adopt a change of direction, and 1978 saw the release of 'Lone Wolf', the first of two albums to be produced by John Boylan. The ten track album was the first to be entirely composed of Murphey's own songs and featured a much more direct rock sound, with at times, jazz overtones. Why it was necessary to record at five studios in order to produce what was a relatively uninspiring album, I'll never understand.

The following year saw the release of 'Peaks, Valley, Honky Tonks and Alleys', an album with one side recorded in the studio and the other 'live' in concert. The Palamino Club in Hollywood was the venue ...



for the live recording which took place on the 19th and 20th of September 1978. 'Years Behind Bars' written with Gary Nunn and Michael's, 'Another cheap western', <sup>which was</sup> coupled with the Smith/Goldsmith tune, 'Western Movies' were the only new songs out of the five tracks on side one. The studio tracks on side two included, 'Texas Morning' co-written with Boomer Castleman. The song had originally appeared on Michael Nesmith's 1971 album 'Nevada Fighter'. Murphey even attempted the Sam Cooke classic, 'Chain Gang', and included two of his new numbers, 'Lightning' and, 'Once a drifter', the latter being a languid, but nonetheless highly melodic ballad. If there was a standout track on the album then surely it was the emotional story song, 'South Coast', which <sup>unfortunately</sup> wasn't a Murphey original.

With assistance from session heavies like Byron Berline, Doug Dillard, Dan Dugmore (Linda Ronstadt's steelie/guitar player) and Michael Botts (once a member of Bread), the album at least proved that Michael's rock based sojourn had been short-lived, and that he appeared to have adopted a softer, more melodic approach. There was of course, a lack of new, quality Murphey songs on the album, <sup>which raised the question</sup> 'Was he drying up?' <sup>'Peaks'</sup> The album also marked the first appearance of fellow Columbia recording artist, Katy Moffatt on backing vocals.

Little was heard of Michael over the next year. <sup>certainly but Dylan produced albums had little impact</sup> He <sup>made</sup> moved his base to a small <sup>tenable</sup> ranch near Taos in New Mexico. Michael did <sup>anyway,</sup> however, find time to compose the soundtrack music for the documentary film about the urban lifestyle of the American Indian titled, 'The Divided Trail'. Produced and directed by Jerry Aaronson, the film was <sup>eventually</sup> nominated for an Oscar.

'The Divided Trail' obviously made Michael aware of another medium for his writing talents and he began writing film scripts. One of the stories on which he collaborated with Michael Kane was made into 'The Hard Country' contemporary country movie by Lord Grade's now defunct film company. Michael apart from appearing in the film, acted as its musical supervisor. It was pure coincidence that the ten track soundtrack album, issued midsummer last year in the States, appeared . . . .

on the Epic label.

Four songs on the album featured Murphey, the remainder was made up of <sup>previously released</sup> tracks by Jerry Lee Lewis, Joe Ely and Tanya Tucker, (Tony also appeared in the film). Two of Michael's tracks were duets with Katy Moffatt, and one of those, 'Take it as it comes' even made the Top100 on the country charts last August. If those <sup>two</sup> songs were passable for a soundtrack album, then Michael's <sup>own</sup> 'Hard party', 'country darlin'' and his rendition of John D. ~~Laudermilk~~'s 'Break my mind' left me in great doubt as to his future credibility as a recording artist. They were DIRE.

Early this year, news came that Michael had signed a new solo deal with <sup>Liberty</sup>/EMI America. The first album titled, 'Michael Martin Murphey' and produced by Jim Ed Norman was issued in the States during March. Although the album is slightly poppish at times there is a firm country base present and what is more, there are quite a number of 'class' songs. Apart from Rafe Van Hoy's 'What's forever for', Michael at least shared the writing credits on the remaining nine songs. In fact, five of those songs were co-written with former Manfred Mann vocalist, Michael D'Abo, which probably accounts for the pop feel. Michael's 'The two step is easy' has already appeared on the country charts, and given a chance, 'Love Affair's' 'Ring of Truth' and particularly, 'Hearts in the right place' all have the credentials to amass substantial sales. In fact I'd go as far as to say that its the best album that Murphey has recorded in years, and I for one am happy that he's back on the rails at last.

Written by,



Arthur Wood