

"AND ON KEYBOARDS, WE HAVE THE LEGENDARY ALABAMA LEANING MAN -
FUNKY DONNIE FRITTS".

Jerry Jeff Walker closed his 1975 album, 'Ridin' High' with one of his more irreverant compositions, 'Pissin' in the Wind'. The song evokes the joys of being a 'Rich, influential recording artist' backed by a superbly efficient record company, (sorry folks, only joking).

Jerry Jeff introduced the song, whiskey soaked tones et all, with the statemant, 'I'd like to dedicate this song to Kris Kristofferson, Johnny Cash, Billy Swan, Funky Donnie Fritts and'. Now that's some pretty heavy company, but who is this guy Fritts? Well, like everything else, some things take a little time, and in this instance, more than a modicum of help from, 'Ezy Ryder', the vinyl palace in that ancient city of Edinburgh. Eventually, however, I laid my hands on an import copy of Donnie's 1974 album, 'Prone to lean'.

For quite a number of years he's played keyboards in Kris Kristofferson's road band. I managed to catch Donnie when he was here with Kris for the Wembley Country Music Festival in April. Backstage at the Arena he filled me in on the details of his musical career.

Q. When and where were you born?

A. I was born in Florence, Alabama, which is part of Muscle Shoals on November 8th 1942 and I was raised there.

Q. Was there a musical background in your family?

A. My father was a great guitarist and bass player and he worked with many Alabama bands, but not as a big time professional.

Q. What were your early musical influences?

A. I've just loved blues music all my life, you know; I guess Ray Charles was one of the earliest influences in my life.

Q. Which instruments did you play when you were young?

A. Well, when I started, I took up the drums first. I played the drums for years, and when I was getting out of High school, I got involved in a publishing Company. Some friends and I were involved with

with publishing Arthur Alexander's hit, 'You better move on'. I suppose it was the first blues record to come out of Muscle Shoals.

I must have been about eighteen at the time, but we really didn't know what we were doing.

Q. Had you played in groups at school?

A. Well, I'd played drums in a number of bands but after being around songwriters, I decided I wanted to write my own songs. That's when I decided to take up the piano; so I could write songs.

Q. When did you move to Nashville?

A. I moved to Nashville when I started with Kris. This would have been about late 1970. I'd been travelling back and forth between Nashville and Muscle Shoals since the start of 1965. I was a staff writer for a publishing company, but I still lived in Muscle Shoals.

Q. Was there a specific reason why you decided to make Nashville your base as a writer?

A. Actually I'd already been writing in Muscle Shoals, and had had a few things cut. Most every body down there signed with Rick Hall and Fame Publishing, (Editor's note: Alexander's aforementioned hit was recorded at Hall's Studio), but I didn't want to sign with him, so I went to Nashville. Luckily, I went to Bob Beckman who was with a publishing company that Shelby Singleton owned at the time, called Raleigh Publishing. Bob signed me up and that's when I got started properly.

Q. When did you sign with Combine Music?

A. I signed with them in about '71 and I was with them for six or seven years.

Q. When did you meet Kris for the first time?

A. I met Kris in about 1968 in Nashville, and we started hanging around and we became friends. When he started singing, his first gig was at the Troubadour in Los Angeles in 1970. He only used Billy Swan and Dennis Linde on that occasion, but on the next gig I joined and I've been with him ever since.

Q. Is the cover shot on your album from the 'Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid' movie?

A. Yea, I actually appeared in the film. I had made a trip with Kris and Sam^(Packin'pah) down to Mexico, way before they started the film and Sam asked me to be in the movie; I've actually done two other films with Sam. Kris and I did a small part in, 'Bring me the head of Alfredo Garcia' and then we did 'Convoy'.

Q. How did the deal for your album with Atlantic come about?

A. Through Jerry Wexler. Jerry and I were very close friends and we'd worked together in Muscle Shoals before. He recorded a lot of different acts, and used some of my songs with those artists. We had a lot of talks about me recording. It was just a really great experience for me recording that album. It may not be the greatest album in the world vocally speaking, but I^{did} get most of my really close friends to play on that album. I got Kris and Jerry together, (Editor's note: they co-produced Donnie's album), and they'd never worked together before. I think it was where they first met. They got on beautifully. All the boys down there on the Rhythm section pitched in, as well as guys from the group here. Of course recording in Muscle Shoals was just like playing in my own back garden.

Q. Were you pleased with the 'Prone to Lean' album?

A. Oh sure, I really was. I think that my own performance could have been a lot better. Naturally I guess everybody says that, but I'm really glad with it. There isn't a thing about that record that I'm ashamed of.

Q. Did you go on the road to promote the album?

A. No, I really didn't. I may sound crazy you know, but here's the thing- I was on the road with Kris, when the thing came out. I did a song on the show with Kris, still do, but I didn't really promote the album.

Q. When did you first meet Jerry Jeff Walker?

A. I think I first met him when Kris and I and Billy were playing the Bitter End in New York, years ago. This would have been the early '70's

and we've kept seeing each other on the road ever since.

Q. I believe that you worked on the first Steve Goodman album. Can you tell us a little about that?

A. Steve is just a great, great guy. Kris was playing a club in Chicago called 'The Quiet 9' and Steve opened for us. Steve in turn introduced us to John Prine, while we were there. It was through those gigs that I came to play on Steve's album. Kris co-produced that first album and Steve liked this one song by me and a guy called Dan Penn titled 'Rainbow Road'. He cut that for his first album.

Q. In 1974, Bonnie Koloc recorded your song, 'You're gonna love yourself in the morning' which was also the title of her album. In 1976 you played on her, 'Close Up' album, which contained another of your songs, 'We had it all'.

A. I think she is also from Chicago, anyway, I actually met her for the first time when I played on the album. Her producer called me in Nashville and asked me to come to the West Coast and play on that one song on the album. I said sure, it was a pleasure. ^{You know,} That girl nearly had a big hit with, 'You're gonna love yourself in the morning'. It turned out that 'We had it all' was a very personal song to her. There's a very tragic story which I won't go into, but she really wanted to cut it and wanted me to play on it. She's a real sweetheart you know.

Q. Even as late as last year, songs from your album were being re-recorded. Carlene Carter cut 'Three hundred pounds of hungry' for her 'Blue Nun' album.

A. I didn't know that, but I'd sure love to hear it. I wish I could keep tabs on all my songs. In fact it's up to the publisher to let me know. A good example of that is, 'We've had it all', which has been cut something like twenty times. For instance, I didn't know for ages that Ray Charles had cut the song- I have to say, that that really got to me, because like I mentioned, Ray Charles was one of my greatest influences.

It really makes me feel good when some of my old songs are recorded. In fact, 'You're gonna love yourself in the morning' is on the album that Kris has just done with Willie^{Nelson}, Brenda Lee and Dolly Parton. Willie does it as a duet with Brenda. Fred Foster the producer has just finished all the cuts on it, but I don't know which label it will come out on. He made some kind of arrangement for them to cut the album, and it may even come out on Fred's own label, Monument. All I can say, is that they did a great job on my song; probably one of the very best cuts ever.

Q. Do you still write with Dan Penn?

A. I sure do. We got a deal now where I got my own publishing and Dan's got his. I still write with Spooner Oldham^{as well}, and I've also been writing songs with John Prine. In fact we've written a couple of real good songs. I talked to him before I came on this tour, and we're gonna get together again when I get back home. There's one song that John and I are holding on to, till he records again.

Q. Tell me a little about this guy Eddie Hinton that you write with?

A. Eddie and I go way back. When he first came to Muscle Shoals he was a session guitarist. We wrote a lot of songs together. Some of them have been our most successful songs as far as sales are concerned. Eddie is from Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Q. Why haven't you ever got another deal to record a second album?

A. Well, I'll be really honest with you, I don't think I'm that qualified as a front man. I'm not being modest or whatever^a; I just don't really think that's my thing. I would never feel comfortable by myself, fronting a band.

Q. Earlier you mentioned another hero of mine, Dennis Linde. Have you ever worked with him?

A. Dennis and I are really good friends. I see him a lot in Nashville. He's still at Combine and he's been writing a lot lately. He's another guy that's dangerous (?) and he should really be cutting records. Another guy I mentioned, who is just a fabulous singer, is Dan Penn.....

Now Dan has just had one of his old songs cut by Willie Nelson.

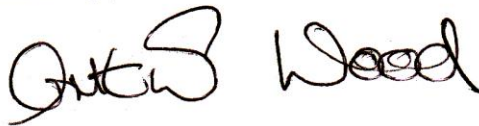
Remember 'Do right Woman' which Aretha Franklin did a good few years back? Dan wrote that song with Chips Moman. Willie cut it for his latest album and he did a great job on it too. It may even be his next single.

Q. Why was your album called, 'Prone to lean'?

A. It came about because Jerry Wexler started calling me the Alabama Leaning man. Its probably because I just lounge around, and Kris came up with that title. In fact he rewrote one of his songs which was on my album, and he called it, 'Prone to lean'.

Donnie seems to be eminently happy in his slot as Kristofferson's Keyboard man, with no real wish to front his own band. The future seems to lie in Donnie composing that elusive chart hit, but I still believe that one day, some of those old songs will do the trick.

Written by,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Arthur Wood', with a stylized, cursive script.

Arthur Wood.

John,

If you can find any way to include the following acknowledgement I'd be grateful.

"Many thanks to Donnie for taking the time to talk to me, but even that would not have been possible without tremendous assistance from Brian Gibson and Sue Banks, in the Mervyn Conn Press Office".

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