

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

### Part 1

*The interview with Cowboy Jack Clement the legendary studio owner/producer/songwriter/recording artist took place on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2004. Cowboy Jack Clement was at his home in Nashville, Tennessee aka the Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa, and I was in Birmingham, England. Back in 1978, Elektra Records released Jack's debut solo album “All I Want To Do In Life.” At the time, Jack was aged forty-seven. Twenty-six years later, his follow-up album “Guess Things Happen That Way” has finally appeared. In this week's episode we talk about both recordings. Many thanks to Kissy Black at Dualtone Music Group for setting up the interview.*

**Folk Wax :** According to notes in the liner booklet of “Guess Things Happen That Way” you began recording the album about fifteen years ago.

**Cowboy Jack Clement :** Well, you know I've recorded some along the way, singles at least, and then I did that one album back in 1978. Then I guess Dualtone came along and asked me to do an album, and that kind of capped it off. I'd been thinking about doing another one, and I'd cut tracks along the way. A couple of things on the album I did a long time ago, like “Ballad Of A Teenage Queen” – I originally cut that back in 1981, I think. “No Expectations” – that was sort of a practice track we did around here one time, and then everybody overdubbed on it and I don't know if there's anything left of the original. Most of the rest of the album was done this year though. I cut the “Guess Things Happen That Way” track about a year and a half ago, and then [Johnny] Cash put his voice on it – over a year ago I guess.

**FW :** One of the things I noticed in the liner credits is that Roy Huskey Jr. played bass. He passed away seven years ago, which indicated to me that you've been working on the album for a while.

**CJC :** I think all he played on actually was “No Expectations.” Dave Roe played on all of the other stuff.

**FW :** Over the years was it a case of you cutting a few songs every so often, being drawn into projects by other artists, and then coming back to your own album.

**CJC :** Well you see, I've had a studio in my house for twenty-five years. Sometimes I go up there and record a thing or two. I've got this band – Cowboy's Ragtime Band - and we go out and do shows. Shawn Camp and Billy Burnette are in the band, and we play around town and record the shows a lot of times, and videotape them. It got to be where it was me and Shawn and Billy and we were going to record stuff on the three of us, together and individually. I, more or less, got into cutting more tracks a couple of years ago – that's how “Guess Things Happen That Way” came about.

**FW :** How long has the Cowboy's Ragtime Band been together.

**CJC :** Well, this latest incarnation has been going about two years. We did a whole month of Monday night shows during October of last year at the Country Music Hall of Fame – at the Ford Theatre. That got a lot of talk going around town. That's kind of during that time that I got the record label interested in doing an album with me.

**FW :** You've mentioned Burnette and Camp, but who else is in the band.

**CJC :** Dave Roe is on bass, and Bobby Wood on piano. I've known Bobby since he was about fifteen – that was back in the late sixties, in Memphis. He's a great piano player and a songwriter. Let's see, Kenny Malone has been my drummer for, like, thirty-three years.

**FW :** You just said the *present incarnation* of Cowboy's Ragtime Band, so has there been previous incarnations.

**CJC :** Well, when I cut my first album I had a band called, Cowboy's Ragtime Band. And it really was kind of a ragtime band. We played Dixieland stuff and country. We played everything, always played “Brazil” – it's a samba. We went out and played a bunch of nightclubs and stuff, and got a good crowd going. It snowed one time, and we put it off that week. Then the next week it snowed, and it snowed and snowed for weeks and then it got to be Christmas. When I tried to put the band back together after that, a couple

of months later – this great trumpet player I had, had moved to Birmingham, and this that and the other, so I just never did put it back together quite like it once was. It was great – it had these three horns in it, and all the horn players sang.

**FW :** Where did you play with that original band, just around Nashville.

**CJC :** The main place we played was old George Jones' Possum Holler down in Printers Alley. We were playing there each Wednesday and Thursday night and I was working on cutting my first album during that time. I set out to cut that thing in thirty minutes. I was going to do it live, you know. It took me two years [Laughs]. The second one took twenty-six, or twenty-five, or whatever it is.

**FW :** Why did you decide to put a band back together after all these years.

**CJC :** Basically, it started when I was going to produce Shawn Camp. We played guitars together and it sounded real good. Then we decided we needed another element and we brought Billy Burnette in. The three of us together are really a neat little rhythm section. Three guitars, and Shawn also plays fiddle and mandolin. A little banjo, as well. I play ukulele and dobro, as well as guitar. Billy Burnette is a fine guitar player and singer. He's been performing since he was three or four. His daddy was Dorsey Burnette. Billy played with Fleetwood Mac for eight or nine years. Then we brought in a bass player named Dave Roe, who I hadn't worked with prior to that, but I really loved his playing and he's my bass player now. For years and years, Roy Huskey Jr. was my bass player, and before that his father was my bass player. They were both brilliant bass players. I'm really hard to please when it comes to bass players. The band is eight or nine pieces. There's a guy named Jay Patten who plays saxophone and mandolin and guitar. I've got two or three steel players that I use – whichever one is available. I'm also going to have this fiddle player who also plays dobro. We do a lot of switching around on instruments. This is a hell of a band, it ain't no ordinary pick-up band

**FW :** What's the fiddle players name.

**CJC :** It's a girl, and her name is Wanda Vick. She plays mandolin and dobro. I just found her recently. Eddy Arnold had worked with her one time, and he kept talking about how great she was. We booked her in to do an overdub session, and I loved her playing. I ain't heard her play dobro yet, but if she plays it like she plays fiddle it will be great. I play a little dobro, so we'll probably get a couple of duet things going. I actually did an instrumental for my new album, but I decided to leave it out. We had more stuff than we needed and I had to narrow it down to twelve tracks.

**FW :** How had you run into Shawn Camp.

**CJC :** I first met him, I guess about twelve or more years ago, at John Prine's house one night. We were over there hanging out and having supper. He was singing and playing and I thought he was really good. And then we talked about me producing him, some time after that. I don't know, we weren't in the same ballpark on material and stuff. I always wanted Shawn to sound different. He wanted to sound like Garth Brooks. I wanted him to sound like Jimmie Rodgers. I wanted him to find his real voice, whatever that is. You see singers will make up these voices and throw them at you. I've had it with singers - they are a pain in the butt. Some people just don't understand singing. They may have great voices and that, but they just don't understand singing, so that is kind of what I have to teach these people. Shawn is coming along. I told him for years that he should not sound at all like other people. That's an affectation. He should find the natural level of his voice, and let it flow. Singers sing better when they are not thinking about it.

**FW :** Did you cut more tracks than actually ended up on the new album.

**CJC :** I always do that. Like my first album, I got the masters back from Warner Bros. and that includes all the outtakes. The stuff we didn't finish. That was fifteen or twenty cuts.

**FW :** You mean including the original cuts on the album.

**CJC :** No. No. This is besides what was released. I'm going to have that old album on the market before too long. If this one does well, then I'll probably let it go on Dualtone. I got the masters back and I've already had them re-mastered and everything, for CD. So it's ready to go. The only problem is it's only ten songs and everybody wants more than that, especially overseas. But I've got these extra cuts and I can

fix them up. You know that song, "Hello In There" by John Prine – I got a really good cut of that, but we decided it was a little too sombre for the album so we didn't put it in.

**FW :** Looking at the 1978 album and this new one, on the older album there were seven cover songs and three songs bearing your name as composer, albeit that one of the latter was traditional. On this new album there's a lot more Cowboy Jack Clement. Was that deliberate.

**CJC :** Well, whenever I start to put a programme together, I don't care where it comes from. That's my rule of thumb, and I pretty well stick to it. I saw it as an opportunity, in that I had these songs that had been collecting around here like "Trapped In An Old Country Song" that Don Robertson and I wrote. We wrote that six or seven years ago, and nothing has happened with it. Charlie Pride cut it for an album, but he didn't sing it right. Then there's "S-e-r-l-o-u-s-l-y" and a bunch of stuff that I figured ought to be out there – and one song that I've published for years that's never been recorded called "There Ain't A Tune." I didn't let that determine what became the final list, it just turned out that I had seven or eight of the twelve songs where I had the publishing or writing, or both sometimes. Which is nice – I mean if the album is a hit that will be fine, and if not, maybe somebody out there will hear one of them songs and record it.

**FW :** Can I ask you about the drawing on the cover of the liner booklet. It was done someone called Herb Burnette.

**CJC :** I've known him since the seventh grade.

**FW :** I wondered if he had any blood connection with Billy, Dorsey and Johnny.

**CJC :** No. No relation at all. We grew up in Memphis, were best friends and hung out and all that stuff. I went in the Marine Corps. and then he went in the Marine Corps. later. One time, I talked him into moving to Nashville. He came here and we opened up an art and photography studio called Pinwheel. We were doing album covers for everybody in town. I got out of that business and let him have it, and he took it and did very well with it. Now, he's retired. Old Scott Robinson, the guy at Dualtone, was out here one day and we were talking about an album cover and he said he'd like to have a line drawing of me. I showed him this insert that was in Billboard about twenty-five years ago, that Herb had drawn. I told him that Herb was retired, but I could maybe talk him into doing something. We did, and he drew it and they loved it.

**FW :** How did he do the line drawing that's on the album cover.

**CJC :** He took it from a black and white photograph, that they did. Dualtone sent a photographer out and we took it out in the back yard. He sketched it from that. Herb's really good. I mean the guy - he was good when he was in seventh grade. And he did it all his life. He could draw anything.

**FW :** One other thing I wanted to ask, is that in the liner booklet there's a picture of you and Johnny Cash. Johnny is wearing a top hat, so you know which picture I mean. How old is that photograph.

**CJC :** Probably from the seventies. Marty Stuart took that picture, up on the little balcony on my house. Cash recorded here a lot. I did three albums with him, here in the house. We took that picture upstairs one day. I always kind of liked it. It looked we were singing our butts off.

**FW :** You mentioned Scott Robinson a few moments ago. How did the album end up on Dualtone.

**CJC :** Well they asked me to do an album.

**FW :** Was that on the basis of seeing you play at the Hall of Fame.

**CJC :** Like I said earlier, we had a little buzz going around town. We managed to pack the place during those four weeks. We had all kinds of people there like the Chancellor of Vanderbilt University and his wife. Plus, I had already sung a song for Dualtone on a tribute album to Waylon. **[Ed. Note.** The album was titled "**Lonesome, On'ry And Mean**"). I cut "Let's All Help The Cowboys [Sing The Blues]" which I had produced for Waylon one time. Anyway, they liked it. It was pretty simple and mostly a four or five piece group and me singing, and that's the kind of solo album they envisioned for me – but I didn't do that at all [Laughs]. But that's alright, they loved my album.

*to be continued*

Arthur Wood.  
Kerrville Kronikles 10/04  
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