

Hall of Famer working on new CD

Ray Price's band has included Roger Miller, Willie Nelson, Johnny Paycheck, Johnny Bush, Jimmy Day, and Buddy Emmons
by Tom Geddie

THERE WAS A TIME, THE CRITICS SAID, when Ray Price saved country music. And there was a time, other critics said, when he ruined it. The truth, as it often is, is somewhere in between, and the truth is also that the legendary crooner is a deserving member of the Country Music Hall of Fame.

In a career that dates back to 1948 — after a stint in the Marines during World War II — the two-time Grammy winner charted 150 or so songs including such classics as “Release Me,” “Crazy Arms,” “Heartaches by the Number,” “City Lights,” “My Shoes Keep Walking Back to You,” “For the Good Times,” “Night Life,” “I Won’t Mention It Again,” “You’re the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me,” and “Danny Boy.”

that talk about broken love. Now I’m going to do one about a dog.”

That song comes, at least partially, from his experiences at the farm he shares with his wife, Janie, near Mount Pleasant where he likes to fish when he gets a nice day.

A country boy

“I’M A COUNTRY BOY. I RAISE pigeons and horses, chickens, and quite a few dogs,” he said.

“My wife and I try to give homes to those throwaway dogs.

“It’s enjoyable to sit down and rest long enough to really see, not just glance at what’s around you but to let it penetrate you. You’d be surprised what’s going on around your world; it can blow you away.

“When you sit and watch an animal, he has a way of talking to you — dogs, horses, maybe even cows — and they find a way of getting with you if you let them. Once that happens, you’ll find a feeling of kinship that’s just almost unreal, and that’s when you start loving your animals, and they will return it.”

A survivor

PRICE BEAT A WELL PUBLI-

cized cancer scare in 2009, and is coping today — at an age when most people are long retired — with various accumulations of the years by doing what he does best — performing — and stopping from time to time to smell the roses.

His schedule is as full as he can make it.

“Starting off this year was kinda tough, maybe one or two shows a month,” he said. “Now I’m beginning to do five or 10, and later in year it will probably be 30 or 40 shows every couple of months.”

Price made time recently to do a telephone interview riding on the band bus toward New Mexico, where he had a Thursday night gig at Mountain Inn of

“I’ve always sung love songs and ballads, but this one may be a little different for me. A cheating song’s alright, but a love song will last forever. As long as somebody is in love, they will like love songs — pretty songs that talk about broken love. Now I’m going to do one about a dog.”

—RAY PRICE

A mentor

PRICE’S CHEROKEE COWBOYS band included — at one time or another — Roger Miller, Willie Nelson, Johnny Paycheck (known then as Donnie Young), Johnny Bush, Jimmy Day, and Buddy Emmons.

He also encouraged songwriters including Nelson, Miller, Bill Anderson, Harlan Howard, Hank Cochran, Mel Tillis, Kris Kristofferson, and others by recording their songs.

His most recent recording is the steel guitar-driven, battle-of-the-sexes song

“Cold War with You,” which he performs with Willie and Lucas Nelson on the new duets CD *Heroes*.

It won’t be his most recent for long, though.

The 86-year-old Price has a new CD in the works — he started it in June — to join the more than 60 already on his resume.

“A lot of people just try to put a big hit or two on an album, but I always try to put as many good songs on an album as I can. I like to be able to sit down and listen to the whole thing.”

Price is not ready to say for sure which songs will be on the album, but he’s pretty sure one will be about a dog and he hopes it will bring tears to listeners’ eyes.

The dog song planned for the new album is

“Collar on the Nail” and, yes, it’s about a dog that died.

“It will blow your mind away,” Price said. “I’ve always sung love songs and ballads, but this one may be a little different for me. A cheating song’s alright, but a love song will last forever. As long as somebody is in love, they will like love songs — pretty songs



He is also a two-time Grammy winner: Ray Price

the Gods in Mescalero, Friday night at Boulder Station in Las Vegas, and Saturday night at Cactus Pete’s in Jackpot, Nevada. A week later, he was due at the Birchmere in Alexandria, Virginia, and then the American Music Theatre in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

After more than 60 years on the road at least half of his time, Price has survived several operations and defied doctors’ orders to spend more time at home.

“I think I’m in good enough shape to do what I’m going to try to do,” he said.

What he does, and has done, is help define country music, first keeping it traditional and then adding orchestral strings in a move that some people criticized as creating the “country-pop” sound; country audiences often resist change.

Well known music writer Bill Malone put it this way: “...during the rockabilly and early country-pop years Price almost single handedly kept the hard country torch aflame and, in so doing, virtually created an industry of musicians who either wrote or played for him.”

Hall of Fame

COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF Fame Director Kyle Young put it this way: “Ray Price is a man of singular and enduring artistic vision whose role as an architect and savior of country music is too little appreciated. The ‘Ray Price beat’ is elemental. Without it, country music would certainly be incomplete. He is a central figure in the 20th Century history of American popular music.”

Price’s full-orchestra recording of “Danny Boy” in 1967 was

no accident.

“I did it on purpose, and it worked. I kinda expanded with honky-tonk strings,” he said. “Strings are kinda the closest thing to a human voice, All the string instruments. If you ever listen to TV or old movies, at certain moments when there has to be a feeling, there will always be strings.

“That’s what I use them for, to enhance the song that I’m trying to portray so people will really like it. I think strings are beautiful.

“Some of this new CD probably will have some songs with strings, but I’m going to do some acoustic things, too.”

There was a time when music was “just a job” for Price, he said.

Today, though, he enjoys performing and finding new challenges in the songs.

“I love what I’m doing. I finally admitted to myself that I really do,” he said.

“At one time it was just a job, but at the same time I enjoyed it. I might have been lying to myself, but I did. I always tried to learn something with each song, a way to sing it where it sounds real. I think I’ve still got a lot to give. I want to do it now.”

That includes “mastering” the songs he sings.

“Even though I sing every night, I still work on them. If I can master it on one or two of the songs, then I’ll be able to handle all of them.

“It’s about trying to be a master of your work. You definitely have to enjoy it. “If the music gets old and you get kinda ragged out on it, shows start being bad and the whole thing would fall apart and it wouldn’t work out like you thought it would.” ■