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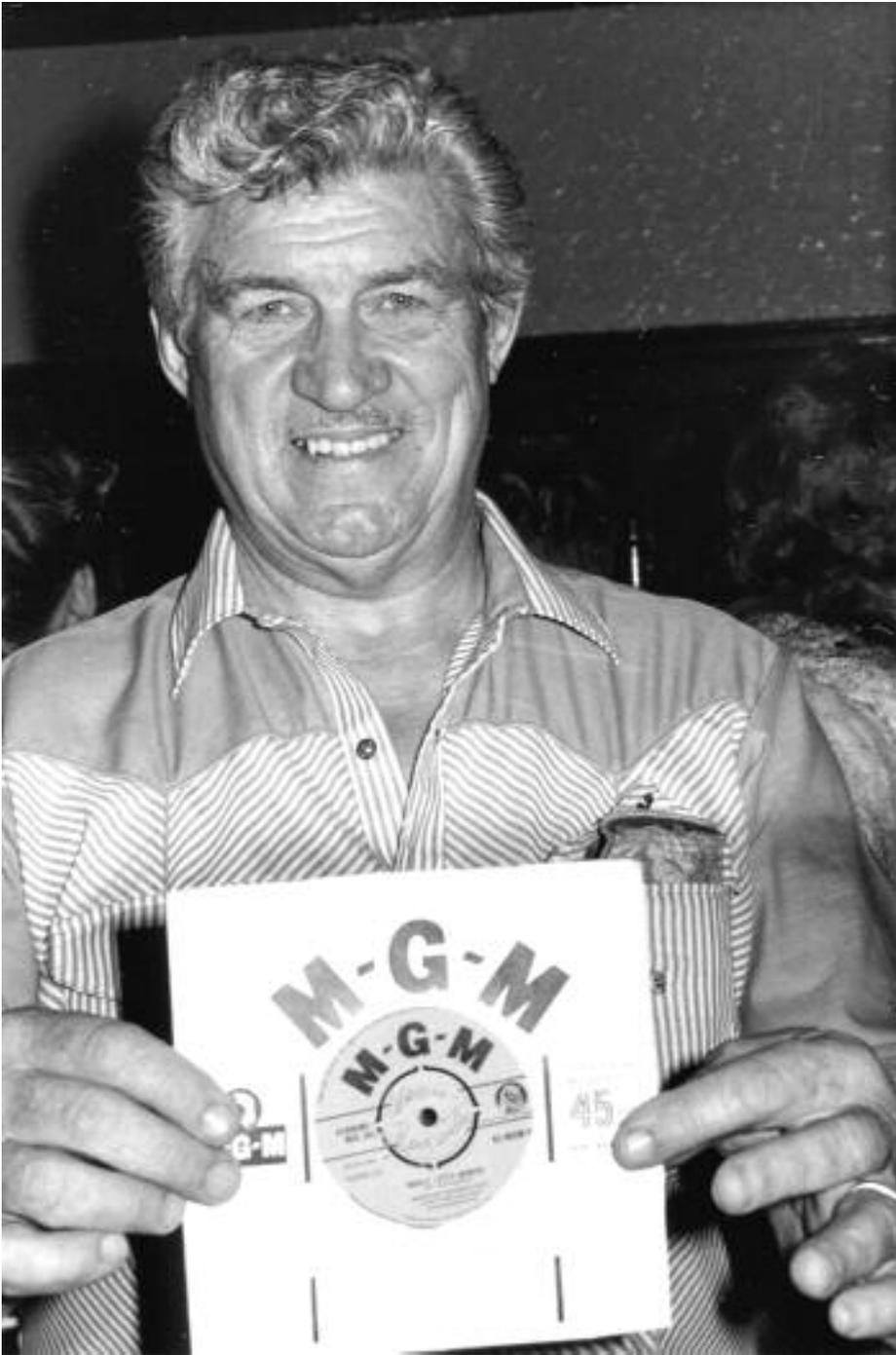
WHOLE LOTTA MAN *Marvin Rainwater*

A larger-than-life character steeped in traditional country music, Marvin Rainwater started his hitmaking career with *Gonna Find Me A Bluebird* and *The Majesty Of Love* (a duet with Connie Francis), and went on to top the UK charts in 1958 with *Whole Lotta Woman*, but after a couple of smaller hits his popularity faded. Somewhere along the line, a real talent — still underrated to this day — missed its way. After battling throat cancer, Rainwater re-emerged during the rockabilly revival of the 1970s and nowadays continues to successfully combine his outside business interests with recording and performing.

I was born Marvin Karlton Rainwater on July 2, 1925 in Wichita, Kansas. Mother's maiden name was Stella Arbell Miller and my father was Cicero Percy Rainwater. I had one older brother, Don (George Donald) who died last year and have two younger brothers, Ray (Percy Raymond) and Bob (Robert Eugene), and a sister, Patty (Patricia Lucille). Some say that our surname originated from English, some say French and some say Indian, but I don't know for sure. I am no relation whatsoever to Cedric Rainwater the bluegrass guitarist, as Rainwater was not his real name — he used it as a stage name. Father was an auto and truck mechanic and mother was a housewife. We lived in Wichita and Esben, Kansas; Muskogee and Tulsa, Oklahoma; Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee.

I studied classical piano when I was a little boy. My mama took in washings — which was a lot of work for her — and got us a piano. I practised on it for eight hours a day until my dad would come home and he'd run me off. Dad didn't encourage me too much with the music, but I loved him and he taught me everything I know. I practised on that classical music until I cut off part of my right thumb in an air grease-gun accident at a Greyhound Bus garage when I was still at high school, and that was the end of my classical career. It was at this time that I took up the guitar and I also played a little tenor banjo and harp. I took some guitar lessons, but I am mainly self-taught. My brother Bob sings and writes songs, and my sister Patty and I have recorded a lot of songs together. She is a great singer and a great songwriter. Mama couldn't play music or sing, so she was so happy when one of her children did.

The first music I remember is mama singing to me. After that, it would



Marvin Rainwater in 1987. (Photo: Paul Harris)

be *Grand Ole Opry* on the radio and artists like Gene Autry, Jimmie Rodgers and Roy Rogers. I loved all of old Hank Williams Sr's stuff — it really turned me on. And I love Webb Pierce's music. Roy Acuff is the one that got me started in country when I was in the navy. We'd listen to his old songs like *The Precious Jewel: 'A jewel on earth, a jewel in heaven / More precious than diamonds, more precious than gold...'*. Ohh, those songs hit us right to the roots of our being, so I gotta give those people a lot of credit for influencing me and a lot of other people. So, I waited till I got in the navy to get interested in country music, and I've been in it ever since.

My first amateur performance took place locally. There was a little grange hall up the road in Sunnysdale, about thirty miles west of Wichita, and I took my little tow-haired brother, Ray, up there with me. I think I was about nine and he was about seven. We did a show for the people there at the grange: I played piano and Ray sang *My Buddy*. He stole the show, and I made him quit singing. *[laughs]* I made my very first radio broadcast around 1940, when I'd be about fifteen years old. It was in Wichita, Kansas on KFBI Radio and I sang *Bury Me Beneath The Willow*.

I went to high school in Wichita and also Walla Walla College in Washington state, where I started a course which I hoped would lead me to study medicine. I guess I was not a good student because I was too interested in telling jokes and making people laugh. My favorite subject was Mathematics, which I got an 'A' in on my report card, but I got a 'D', I think, or maybe a 'F' in Biology & Anatomy, which appertained to what I was hoping to study! So, I guess I went to college for the wrong purpose. After a short spell at Walla Walla College I had to go into the navy. I intended to be a doctor, but it's just as well it didn't work out because that's not what I'm cut out to be.

During my two years in the navy, I never served aboard a ship, but was employed as a Medical Corps man and storekeeper in Philadelphia, Washington, DC and Bremerton, Washington. I was discharged sometime in 1944 and went out to Oregon to work for my uncle, Joe Rainwater — daddy's brother — in his logging and sawmill business. I also worked for Anton Biro, my daddy's sister's husband, who was a Hungarian. I learned a lot from him — except for how to speak English! He was a genius with machinery and equipment and built a lot of original parts for his sawmill. He got run over by a carload of old ladies and died a long time ago. I sure liked him. In 1944, I met and married my first wife, Charlene Ruetke, in Oregon.

Was I *really* a lumberjack in Oregon? *[in a mock-aggressive, storytelling voice]* Yes, I *was* really a lumberjack, and I climbed trees, and I went up the side of a mountain with a gas can in one hand and a big, heavy chainsaw in the other and cut timber all day until noon!

Yes, I logged in Oregon after the navy, and then in Virginia (Washington, DC) and Minnesota. I used to climb trees and cut the top out, and the tree would swing back and forth about fifteen feet — quite exhilarating — but I would be writing a song and several times put my life in jeopardy by inattention.

While working at these jobs, I was performing as an amateur. I've never been part of a group, I've always been solo. Of course, I need a band to sing, but I just go out as a single act.

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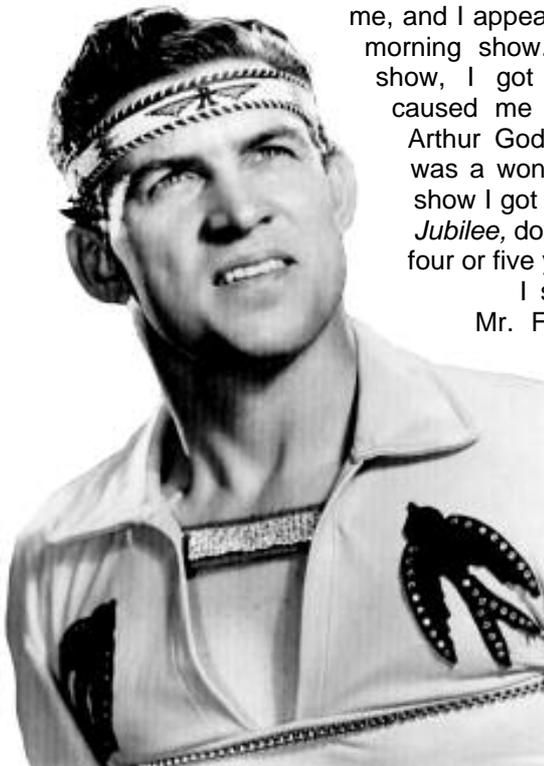
I turned professional in 1951, when I worked a little club in Georgetown, up there in Washington, DC. I can't remember the name of the club, but I paid my band \$200 a week and I got paid \$100 a week for me *and* the band, and so it cost me \$100 a week to be a professional! This went on for quite a long while. Friends called me 'Starvin' Marvin' when I started out singing — that was a pet name for me, 'cause that's all I ever did... starve.

So, I finally decided to try my luck at songwriting and moved back to Virginia, Washington, DC. There, I worked for my brother, Ray, who had a tree expert business, and got close to the Library of Congress, where you copyright songs. Also, that is where I met Ben Adelman, who was in partnership with Bill McCall of Four Star Records out in California. Bill heard my stuff and put out a record on Rainwater Records — a label he started just to put out my stuff.

It was in 1955 that Bill McCall put out *I Gotta Go Get My Baby* b/w *Daddy's Glad You Came Home* on Rainwater — also on Four Star and Coral. Subsequently, Teresa Brewer cut *I Gotta Go Get My Baby*. Justin Tubb went to No.1 with that song, which was also cut by several other artists including Rose Maddox. So, this song is responsible for any success I ever had. It got me started as a writer and then a singer. My style then was pure down-to-earth country music, but I just loved music no matter what it was — classical, country, rockabilly, rock, pop... anything. I just loved music and still do.

In May 1955, my brother Ray got me on the Arthur Godfrey show. He contacted them and sweet-talked them into having me, and I appeared off and on for a year on the morning show. When I sang *Baby* on his show, I got response from labels, which caused me to eventually sign with MGM. Arthur Godfrey was real good to me and was a wonderful man. On account of his show I got on Red Foley's show, the *Ozark Jubilee*, down in Missouri and was there for four or five years, from 1955 through 1960.

I signed with MGM in 1955 with Mr. Frank Walker, the president of MGM Records, on account of I thought so much of Hank Williams Sr, and he did too. That's why he put me on this label. The first record I cut for them was *Albino Stallion* in 1955. Eventually, in 1956, I wrote and recorded my first hit, *Gonna Find Me A Bluebird*, and my career took off — if you think three hundred one-nighters a year, at low money, a career.



I appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* to plug *Bluebird*. I don't really remember hearing it for the first time on the radio, but it made me feel good to see it go up in the country charts and it crossed over into the general popular charts. MGM was where I released most of my records. Rockabilly songs like *Hot And Cold*, *Boo Hoo*, etc. went unnoticed in the MGM catalogue for years, but did quite well in Europe.



I think it was in 1956, when I was doing a show in Memphis with Johnny Cash and others, I was onstage singing when all at once a couple of dozen teenagers rushed the stage. I backed off and thought: 'Man, I'm being *mobbed* — I've got it made!' But I never felt the impact of the rushing bodies. They climbed up on the stage and ran through the curtains at the side, screaming and shouting. It seems that Elvis Presley had come to see Johnny, and he decided to just walk out of the curtains a little ways and shake his hips at the crowd. That was unbeknownst to me. Well, the young 'uns swarmed him, but it was quite a blow to my ego!

In 1957, they came to me with a girl named Connie Francis and asked me if I'd cut a record with her. When I heard her voice I said: 'I certainly will!' We cut *The Majesty of Love* and one of my songs, *You, My Darlin', You*, on September 5, 1957 in New York City, and I thought they were two good recordings. I'm still very proud of those. They weren't separately mixed: we cut them together right at the same time. I don't think that I lost out because MGM were pushing Connie Francis. She did well and went on to get an award for being the best singer in the world, and I thought that was great.

My brother, Ray, and our manager, Norm Riley, thought up the publicity of me being a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. They thought it would work — and I loved the costumes. My mother and father were rather indifferent to the Cherokee publicity, as they weren't sure about our family tree anyway. Real Cherokees trying to converse with me happened many times, but no-one ever rescued me — and what a tongue-lashing I got, such as: 'You blue-eyed punk, you no Indian!'

I felt like writing a rockabilly song, so I wrote *Whole Lotta Woman* in about 1958. I mean that *beep* that I had on there was rockabilly: I didn't know it at the time, but that's what it turned out to be. It was just something that was done inside of me and I thought it was gonna be a big hit. The song, inspired by several lovely ladies, was recorded in Nashville and Jim Vienneau produced it. I don't know how many takes, because I went flat on the '*I know I bin had*' line. In those days, we couldn't overdub the voice as it was all mixed up with the other music, and I was very unhappy with that flat note and

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nobody could change it. So, I said: 'Let's go back and do it unison, and when I get to that part you bring it down a little and I'll hit it hard.' And we did, and it turned out that it gave that song a sort-of 'radio frequency' sound — some kind of a strange, haunting sound that he gave it by using that unison, and that really helped the record.

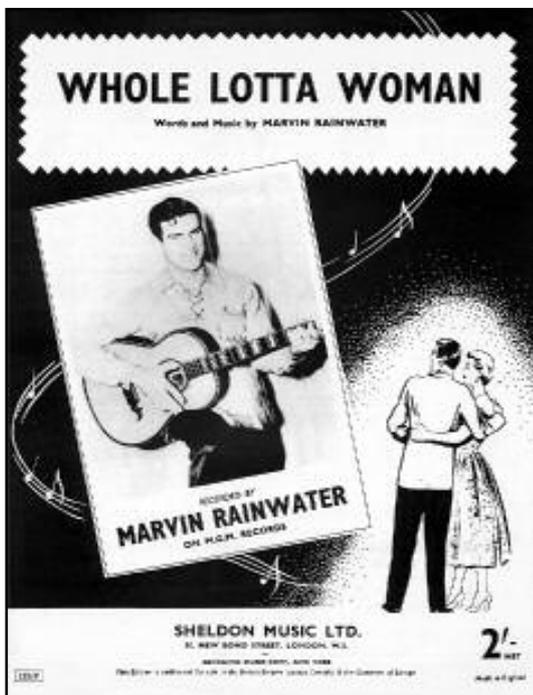
I didn't play on the session. Grady Martin is the one that did that great six-string bass guitar walking around, Floyd Cramer played that lovely piano, and I think it was Harold Bradley who played the wild lead guitar — it was really great what he did. There was a radio station in Buffalo, New York, started playing the record really heavy, and then all of a sudden they got the word that the record was banned because it was 'dirty'. They said '*I'd been had*' was a dirty line and they couldn't use it, so all the networks quit playing the song and we thought the record had had it, it was done. I felt very bad about that, because I *really* felt that song had a chance to go. My brother, Ray, thought that was funny. He said it was no good, and everybody else said it was no good. Yet, all of a sudden, it started showing up in England and climbed the charts over there and went to No.1. When I found it had gone to No.1 in England, I jumped ten feet in the air! So, I had my revenge, as it turned out they were a little wrong and had to eat some real crow on that one!

At the outset, *Whole Lotta Woman* was promoted by me in the States. I went on shows like Dick Clark's *American Bandstand*. This was a great show — we just didn't get paid for it — but it did great for helping our records out. It didn't do me any good anyhow, as they banned my record and it wasn't allowed to be played in the United States. However, it was because of songs

like *Whole Lotta Woman* I got to go to England and then around the world and back to my rockabilly roots. I toured in 1958 all over England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland with the No.1 record in the country.

I enjoyed every show we did on my UK variety tour in 1958 with all the different acts on the bill, like ventriloquists, comedians and stuff. I thought it was great, and I loved the reception I got from the wonderful, wonderful British people. You'll have ask my brother what we got paid for that tour. I really don't know what we got paid, but we made quite a lot of money.

One of the highlights of the 1958 UK tour was





appearing on the *Sunday Night At The London Palladium* television show. Johnny Duncan & The Blue Grass Boys did a superb job of backing me. What a thrill! On that tour I used Dreadnaught acoustic Martins.

I did try and put over a country show in my first visit: I didn't have the material to do otherwise. If I had known that *Hot And Cold* and *Boo Hoo*, etc. were popular, I would have had a lot better show for the times, but my judgment has always been flawed for some reason. The audiences and critics *still* don't know what to make of me. Neither do I! My cross between a genius and an idiot puts me into a unique category. Maybe it was because I fell off a porch headfirst onto a big rock when I was a kid that caused it, or maybe it was because my older brother, George Donald Rainwater, swung a baseball bat and hit me squarely in the forehead (not his fault). These, or some other factors have — at times — put me into a state of mental distortion, but I do have my moments of satisfaction. Hey, that's a good title! Think I'll write *Mental Distortion* — ha! Would you like a copy of my recording, *Bungee Jumpin' With The Livin' Dead*???

I have some funny memories from that UK tour. We went clear up to the Shetland Islands — it was in April. Everything was going on fine, except it was very damp and cold up there. My room got very cold all of a sudden and I felt like I was freezing to death. I piled more covers on and I *still* couldn't get warm, so I went down to the desk and I asked the woman: 'What happened to the heat?'

She said: 'It's April, darling.'

I said: 'I know, but where's the heat?'

She said: 'We turn the heat off in April, darling.'

I said: 'Oh, mercy!'

We had to find a follow-up to *Whole Lotta Woman* and I hadn't written one yet — I was too busy singing that one. I wish I had a chance to do it over, 'cause I could come up with some *real* dandies, but anyhow we found a song I love very much called *I Dig You Baby*. Although I can't remember the precise details, a guy called Stevenson — I forget his first name* — and I were co-writers on this record. I remember working on the lyrics with him, but I think he was responsible for the hip phrases of '*I dig you baby*' and '*You're too much, the most*' — I just sang 'em! It was published by Geronimo Music and we had part of that company. There was no problem to keeping composers' credits separate back in those days: they didn't ask for half the writing like they do now. If you wrote it, you wrote it; and if you didn't, you didn't. And you didn't have to share your writing with anybody. With some of my songs, I had a share of the publishing. On others, I just got the writing on it.

After *I Dig You Baby*, my career just kept on a-going and I just kept singing around the world, on and on and on. With such a gruelling agenda — two shows a night for three years — my voice soon gave way and collapsed, and after that I had an awful time recording for a long time. I recorded a whole lotta records for MGM after *I Dig You Baby*, but I don't remember all the names of the songs. It was dozens and dozens, maybe hundreds. I had considerable success with *Half Breed* in 1960. I did songs with my sister — *Because I'm A Dreamer* and *Two Fools In Love* — and I did *Wayward Angel*, and all kinds. Then I did some rockabilly stuff: *Boo Hoo* and *Hot And Cold*, which was in the bootleg charts about 25-30 years, and *Gamblin' Man* and *Love Me Baby* and all those rockabilly

things I love so much. Now they're all coming back: those people over in Europe love rockabilly, so I've been traveling over there doing a lotta shows for them and having a wonderful time.

I was treated very well at MGM. Mr. Walker used to take me into his office and we'd talk about Hank Williams. I crossed paths with fellow recording artists Tommy Edwards and Conway Twitty — who also had big hits with MGM — and was great friends with Conway Twitty especially. Boy, it'd take me a long



* Augustus.

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time to list the friends I made in this business: Johnny Cash, Charlie Louvin, Freddie Hart, Jimmy Dickens, Webb Pierce, Kitty Wells, Johnny Wright, Bobby Bare... just on and on and on — I've worked with just about every one of them... Hawkshaw Hawkins, Jeannie Shepherd... I've just worked the road with so many of these people over the years and I love every one of them.

Did I get all my royalties? Well, I suppose so. I never did audit them or anything — my brother Ray managed me and looked after my interests — but I got quite a lot of money from them.

I had to leave that wonderful label, MGM, in the mid-Sixties because my voice was so shattered. I couldn't record good enough to release. I had no control of my voice, went flat and got very hoarse. I don't remember when my voice gave out completely, but after MGM and I parted, I just recorded on my own label and some other little labels. In 1967, I moved from Falls Church, Virginia to Chicago and joined my friend, Bill Guess, in recordings which we made in Nashville. We started the Brave label and built our Brave Studios in Harvey, Illinois. When Bill died, I moved to Aitkin, Minnesota and started another label, Okie Records. I recorded several records on Okie.

At that time I actually did think about leaving showbusiness, but I didn't. Had I not remained in the business, then I had the chance to be a booking agent down in Nashville. I've been in business for myself all my life, having log trucks, trimming trees and doing all kinds of things, so I don't think it would be real hard to find something to do. I never really counted on anybody to give me a pay check, 'cause I always went out and scrounged for myself and managed to come up with something. When you get used to that, it's no problem.

I kept hanging in there and in 1975 I found out that I had cancer in my throat. I had been a heavy smoker — five packs a day — for years. In the same year, I had an operation at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. They went down there and cut out the glands — the thyroid glands and the other glands — and got rid of it. I had nodules on my vocal chords and they cut those off, and my voice came back after I conquered the cancer, but it came back high. It wasn't as low as it used to be. It was real deep baritone before



and I couldn't hit high notes. Now, I can hit high notes but have trouble with the low ones. It's weird, but that's what life gives you. You gotta live with it.

How did I deal with the temptations of ladies, drink and drugs? *[laughs]* I loved 'em all! Yes, there was pressure with the success and it cost me my marriage, being gone all the time and not ever being home. That's hard on a family, and they don't stick around too long, but music is in my blood and I had to stick with it. I have had three wives. One of them was Charlene, who I mentioned earlier, and her children, Jimmy (Marvin James) and Judy. Then I got married again, to Barbara, and she had a boy and two girls: Wade Tracy, Barbara Allen and Lorelee. Barbie (Barbara Allen) and Lorelee sing, but are busy with families. Emily (Barbie's teenager) has a lovely voice and I might promote her one of these days. Now I'm married to Sheree and she's a cute little thing. She sings once in a while and she plays sax, and I love to hear her play sax on *Whole Lotta Woman*.

Given the choice of any, which song would I like to have written? Well, that would have to be the song I recorded, written by Jimmy Walker, called *Daddy's Footprints*. Ohh, what a story about him: the man stumbling back and forth half-drunk and his little boy tagging along, just worshipping every step he took. That song really knocks me out and it does disc jockeys, too. And the record I would've liked to have recorded? Well, I guess it would be a toss-up between Bob Seger's *Old Time Rock'n'Roll* or Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Proud Mary*. I love those two songs; I do 'em all the time. Today I play a '58 Jazzmaster — lots of finger and a real workhorse.

I'm very proud of my place in musical history. Even though it had a lot of ups and downs, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed making people laugh, and I enjoyed singing for people if they liked the songs I was doing. 'Specially, I like rockabilly, 'cause the young kids just jump up and down and sing the songs with ya and they love every word you sing. And that makes me go into a trance — I really do my best for them.

I own a lot of my own masters. Since the break-up with MGM nobody wanted them, but now that I've got things organized again I've got a great catalog of my own material that I own everything to. I've got a brand new CD right now full of wild rockabilly music that'll be on the market real soon. It's called *'Rockabilly Wildman'*, and I believe it will be on the Rollercoaster label. On this CD I've tried to capture the way I feel about rockabilly and I just hope they understand and enjoy what I am doing.

You really can't get the enthusiasm going like we do at rockabilly shows. I don't have to try to keep *Hot And Cold* fresh, because every time I sing it, they make me sing it about three times — and I don't know why! *[laughs]* Roy Clark played the lead guitar on that, and I think that might be the reason why. Every time I do it, the musicians work real hard on it and learn it *exactly* right, and it brings the house down. It's just a song that's *weird*. In the last few years I have been contacted by promoters around the world and they have booked me on rockabilly shows in England, France, Finland, Germany, Sweden, and Las Vegas and Wisconsin in the States.

I guess the lowest spot in my career, and maybe in my life, was when I found out that I had cancer in my throat. It explained all the problems I'd had for five, six or ten years before that, because my voice just kept getting

hoarse and hoarse. It got where I couldn't speak, couldn't sing at all, and I still wanted to sing and I couldn't. When I found out what the problem was, that was the lowest point in my career, I think. So, I took the chance to go in and have it removed and cut out of my throat. I guess the high spot was when they got rid of it and told me I was clean, and I hope that it *stays* clean. The Good Lord willing, we'll keep on a-pickin' and a-grinnin'.

Am I a religious man? Well, I had somewhat of a religious upbringing by my grandmother on my daddy's side and didn't get to be a 'wildman' till much later in life. Caroline Rainwater had nine children, one of which was my dad, and at least two of her children are still living. A lot of my family lived to be 100.

My daddy's brother, George, is still alive and kicking in Tennessee and going on 100, and daddy's sister, Lucy, is still somewhere in California and I think she reached 100 some time ago. Granny lived to be 102 and cooked dad's breakfast every morning. She was a vegetarian and followed the Seventh Day Adventist religion, in which she indoctrinated me. I have a new CD about faith and love, and the lead song is *Someone's Watching Over Me*. In that song I summed up how I feel: I could never be ashamed of my Jesus, and I just hope he's not ashamed of me.

It pleases me greatly to know that *Whole Lotta Woman* has not been forgotten because I, at the time, thought that I had written a wonderful song telling a woman how great she was. All the people put it down and tried to stop it, and the fact that it was banned in the United States — all that worked against it. But the English people went ahead and said: 'Hey! He's written a great song about a woman, and I like it.' I'm sure happy that they did that, 'cause I would've been real sad if that hadn't happened.

If I could go back, would I do anything differently? Well, I probably *should*. When I think back on it, I probably should've paid more attention to what I was doing, but I was having so much *fun* that I couldn't pay attention! I just had to enjoy it — and I did — from one end to the other.



Photo: Paul Harris