

**'Cowboy' Jack Clement 'Speaking Freely'  
transcript**

*Recorded Sept. 19, 2003, in Nashville, Tenn.*

**Ken Paulson:** Welcome to "Speaking Freely," a weekly conversation about free speech in America. I'm Ken Paulson. Today our guest is a songwriter, producer, and music industry legend who has worked with everyone from Jerry Lee Lewis to U2: Jack Clement.

**Jack Clement:** [Plays and sings] "You ask me if I'll forget my baby. / I guess I will someday. / I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way. / You ask me if I'll get along. / I guess I will someday. / I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way. / God gave me that girl to lean on. / Then he put me on my own. / Heaven help me be a man, / have the strength to stand alone. / I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way. / Ba-do, ba-do. Ba-do, ba-do. [Trumpets melodically] / You ask me if I'll miss her kisses. / I know I will every day. / I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way. / You ask me if I'll find another. / I don't know. I can't say. / I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way. / God gave me that girl to lean on. / Then he put me on my own. / Heaven help me be a man, / have the strength to stand alone. / I don't like it, but I guess things happen that way. / Ba-do, ba-do. Ba-do, ba-do. Ba-do, ba-do."

**Paulson:** Now, that was a very early and a very big hit for Johnny Cash.

**Clement:** Mm-hmm.

**Paulson:** But you have dozens of those. I mean, you've been involved in the music industry for 50 years.

**Clement:** Yeah, yeah.

**Paulson:** And it began, I guess, in Washington, D.C. You had a duo?

**Clement:** Well, I had a band. I was a duo at times. But I really started when I was in the Marine Corps in about 1950, when I got transferred to Washington, D.C., the 8th and 9th Street (base). It was – all we did was ceremonial stuff, but they were all right. And the base took up a city block about eight or 10 blocks from the Capitol building. So, there was little clubs up and down 8th Street. And I used to play them. And we played a dance in southern Maryland every Saturday night. So, I had me a little enterprise going.

**Paulson:** [Laughs] Well, you ended up back in your hometown of Memphis. And at one point you walk into the legendary Sun Studios, and Sam Phillips eventually decides to hire you?

**Clement:** Yeah, the first time I went, I'd moved back to Memphis, and I'd played music and all that. And I was pretty good. So, I called him up, and I got an audition with him. And I went in there, and he gave me a really good audition. Maybe he spent an hour, or so, with me. I sung a lot of stuff. And his conclusion was, I was a little too slick for what he was doing at that time. Then a few months later, I produced a record at a radio station with a guy named Billy Lee Riley. And we needed to have it mastered. We were going to press it up on our own label. So, I took it to Sam to have it mastered. And when I came back to pick it up,

he said, "I want to talk to you." Said, "I really liked that thing." And then he started to ask me if I'd be interested in it being on Sun. He'd pay us a penny a record. I said, "Well, I'll talk to my partner, Slim Wallace." And then he said, "Well, what are you doing?" I said, "I've been going to Memphis State for a couple years. Now I'm working out at a building supply place, and I don't like it very much." He said, "Well, maybe you ought to come work for me." I said, "Well, maybe I should." Two weeks later, June the 15th, 1956 - I remember that day because that's the day I went into the Marine Corps and got out of the Marine Corps - June 15. So, I went there, and at that point, I was really interested in equipment. I had built a little studio in Slim Wallace's garage, but it wasn't equipped well enough to actually make a record, a master record. We rehearsed there and worked it up, but - later on, they did; they finished it and cut some hits in there. But suddenly I had echo and everything. That's the first thing I wanted Sam to show me: how to, how to get that echo.

**Paulson:** Well, at some point, you decided you're better off behind the boards: composing, producing -

**Clement:** Well, actually, I had gotten very interested in that, more interested. And I decided early along that I probably shouldn't be an artist, 'cause I noticed I'd usually have to have a few cocktails to get in the mood for it. I gotta say, this could lead to - I could become an alcoholic, rather than just a drunk or something. [Chuckles] No, you know, I really am - I really got attracted to the other side of the control-room window.

**Paulson:** And you really became Sam Phillips' right hand. I mean, you -

**Clement:** I was, I was actually his first full-time assistant in, in that area.

**Paulson:** And Sam was off on what I think was a pretty rare vacation or business trip when in walks a young man who wants to play the piano for you.

**Clement:** Sam was in town, but he wasn't at - he was at home, I think.

**Paulson:** I see.

**Clement:** So, the girl up front came back and said, "There's this guy out here. Says he plays piano like Chet Atkins." "Oh, really? I'd like to hear that." So, he came back with his daddy, Elmo Lewis, and he sat down at this little spinet piano and did "Wildwood Flower." And it sounded like Chet Atkins would be playing "Wildwood Flower" on the piano. And I liked it. I said, "Well, do you sing?" "Yeah." "Well, sing me something." So, he started singing these wonderful country songs. But it wasn't even rock and roll. And at that time, well, country was really in the doldrums, and, and Sam wasn't really trying to compete with Nashville. He was into rock and roll, so. Anyway, I made a tape of him singing, and he was singing a couple of George Jones songs. George Jones was about the only guy at that time that was really happening, country-wise, with a song called "Window Up Above" and "Seasons of My Heart." And Jerry Lee played them in his way, and it was great. So, I made a tape of that. And then I played it for Sam, and he said, "Well, get him in here." In the meantime, he showed up in a few days. I said,

"I've been fixing to call you." I said, "What are you doing Thursday?" I think this was on a Monday. "If you come in here, I'll get some musicians, and we'll cut some tapes." "OK." Thursday morning, Sam drove to Nashville to go to the music convention. So, he was in the car when Jerry Lee came in, and we did - Jerry Lee had written a song called "End of the Road," which was kind of rockin'. But the best thing he had was a version of an old song by Gene Autry called "You're the Only Star in My Blue Heaven." [Plays and sings gently] "You're the only star in my blue heaven. Pause. And you're shining just - " Jerry Lee sits down and goes bom-bom-bom. [Sings wildly] "You're the only star in my blue heaven." All right, now we're rocking. That's when I told him I'd booked him - booked some boys. So, we really went in to cut that. I was flipped over that thing. Toward the end of the session - now, at this time, "Crazy Arms" had been out, by Ray Price, for six months. It peaked and been covered by the Andrews Sisters. It was peaked - pop, too. But I said - we were about to quit, and I said, "You know 'Crazy Arms'?" He said, "I know a little of it." And we did it. And when we did it, the bass player thought we were just messing around, so, he was in the bathroom. And the only thing it had on it was drums and piano. It didn't even have a bass on it. But I had a mike on the bass drum. Anyway, Sam came back to town. When he got - came in Monday and I put that tape on, started playing, before it ever got to the singing, he reached over and stopped it. And he said, "Now, I can sell that."

**Paulson:** [Laughs]

**Clement:** Like, as if to say, "You young whippersnapper, you finally done something I like around here."

**Paulson:** Sam Phillips is obviously best known for discovering Elvis Presley, but if you had not let Jerry Lee Lewis into Sun Studios that day, we may never have heard from him. I mean, you really discovered Jerry Lee Lewis.

**Clement:** I cut his first records.

**Paulson:** And you actually cut his biggest. And I understand that "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" was not exactly intended when you recorded that?

**Clement:** OK. I had written a song – "Crazy Arms" did real well considering it was, you know, after the fact, almost. But it sold about 150,000 without any promotion, just in – around Memphis and several other places. So, we needed to cut another record with him. So, I'd been trying to write something, and I'd written a song called "It'll Be Me." And we were working on that. And I was getting tired of it, so, I walked out into the studio and said, "Let's get off this awhile, Jerry. We'll come back to it later. Let's do something else for a while." And his bass player said, "Hey, Jerry, do that song we been doing on the road, people like so much." "OK." I said, "Well, let me go turn the machine back on." I walked in; I hit play and record; and I turn around and sit at the control board; and they did it. No dry run; nothing. Just one take. And it was "Whole Lotta Shakin'." Then we went back to messing with "It'll Be Me." We didn't even play it back at the time, I don't think. But later, when we started playing it back – played it back all night. And Sam loved it.

**Paulson:** Well, you've had a remarkable career in country and in, in rock and roll. But that group of people you worked with in Sun Studios, especially early on – obviously, you worked closely with Johnny Cash. Did you work with Carl Perkins as well?

**Clement:** I only did about, I think, one session with him. He left within about a year, or so, after I went to work there.

**Paulson:** Jerry Lee Lewis, of course.

**Clement:** Yeah. Charlie Rich.

**Paulson:** Did you catch any of Roy Orbison, or was he gone by then?

**Clement:** He was the first guy Sam let me work with. I spent a lot of time with him. We got to be real good buddies. I never cut a hit with him, but we cut some pretty good things. There was one called "Rock House." And I think the best thing I ever did with him was something called "Sweet and Easy to Love." It was a kind of a Dean Martin-ish sort of a thing. [Sings] Chuh-dung, chuh-dung, dung.

**Paulson:** You are credited with actually helping Johnny Cash develop a very distinctive sound early in his career. You wrote "Ballad of a Teenage Queen," which was a big hit for him. And then you were in the studio to help him get that sound. What was different about Johnny Cash?

**Clement:** Well, Sam used to talk about him a lot. Johnny Cash was sort of Sam's favorite. Well, no question about it; he was his favorite. He used to tell me what a great guy he was, what a gentleman he was, how easy he

was to work with. He'd go out on the road, and he'd write some songs, work 'em up with his band, come in every few weeks, and record some stuff. And it was that way. And, of course, it was a simple, little sound: boom chica with a bass and drums and a guitar or something. I'm the one that started putting vocal grips and all that stuff to it. You know, production. But Sam would talk about Sam – Sam would talk about Cash like a – you know, he would talk about how much authority he had in his voice and how when he sang, people believed him. That was the biggest part of it. To me, the fun part was the fact that he had the most efficient recording voice I've ever heard. It's a, it's a dream on a V.U. meter. It's not, [Blows noisily] it's not that. And it's getting right on the tape. And you can put a symphony orchestra behind it, and he's still dominating it. That's what I like about it. I couldn't resist puttin' a lot of production with him, because of that voice. We always call him "Captain Decibel."

**Paulson:** [Laughs]

**Clement:** Really.

**Paulson:** And your gift of production is what led Johnny Cash to call you when he wanted "Ring of Fire" cut a certain way.

**Clement:** Yeah, he had – he'd had a dream about the song, and he heard trumpets on it in his dream. So, he called me. I was in the bathtub in Beaumont, Texas. And he called me and wanted me to come up and help him do it. I came up, and I brought this guitar. And he had these, these two horn players in the studio booked. They didn't know what they were supposed to do, but they were there. And I think I knew both of them. I know I knew one of 'em. So, I went over

and I said, "Well, why don't you go: [Bouncy] da-de-da-de-da-da-da." And they write that down. And I said, "Go: [Deeper] da-de-da-de-da-da-da." And they write that down. And we played it. And that was "Ring of Fire."

**Paulson:** And that was easily one of Johnny's two or three biggest hits.

**Clement:** Mm-hmm. They thought it had, you know – a lot of people thought it was kind of strange, putting trumpets on the record, but hey, Louis Armstrong did it and Jimmie Rodgers did it. Did you know Jimmie Rodgers had Louis Armstrong playing on some of his records?

**Paulson:** No.

**Clement:** Yeah; I did an album with Louis Armstrong one time, a country album. And that was in 1970. Johnny Cash's TV show was still going, I think.

**Paulson:** Yeah, yeah.

**Clement:** So, they had Louis come down and sing that song with John that he'd recorded with Jimmie Rodgers, played trumpet on.

**Paulson:** Well, you know, this show is about living in America – a place where you can pretty much say what you want, write what you want, sing what you want – and there are people like you who have pushed the envelope, really broken down barriers. The early rock and roll was something. The vitality of early Jerry Lee Lewis records, virtually unheard of, of – supposing, say, Little Richard was a rival. There were some other people. Sun was amazing. But the other place where you broke down barriers was where you discovered Charley

Pride, a major, a major country-western star who also happened to be an African-American. Did – and, of course, that's sort of the inverse of Sam Phillips finding Elvis – trying to find a white man who could sing black – finding a black man who could sing country western, as it was called at the time. Is that what you set out to do?

**Clement:** Actually, I used to talk about it when I was working at Sun. "We'll get a black guy and teach him how to sing country." I actually had a guy I was trying to do that with. As it turned out, I didn't have to teach Charley Pride how to sing country. He already knew. He knew for the same reasons I knew. He grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry down in Sledge, Mississippi, him and his whole family. And he loved Hank Williams, and he was for real. And he looked good. And I decided I'd take a shot with him.

**Paulson:** How'd you find him?

**Clement:** Well, a friend of mine named Jack Johnson had been telling me about him for a while, even before I moved here. When I was still in Beaumont, I met him and – but when I moved here, we were at this place called the Professional Club one night. The building's gone now, but it used to be a place where men – Tom T. Hall and Kristofferson and – first night he came to town, we went there. And Marijohn Wilkin and a lot of people – it was close to the Columbia studio. Bradley's Quonset Hut, they called it. And a lot of people would come there on breaks between sessions and stuff, so, it was just a hangout. It was a great place to go and sing your songs – latest songs to a bunch of other songwriters and so on, but I was there talking to Jack one night. He got to

talking about Charley Pride, and we had a couple cocktails or two or three. He talked me into going across the street to Cedarwood, where he was doing P.R. work, and he had a tape. I listened to it. It was pretty good, you know? It was really – it wasn't that great compared to what he really was. It was done on a home machine or something. But it was enough that we went back over there, had a couple more cocktails. I said, "All right, get him on in here. I'll cut him. I'll pay for it." And he was living in Montana at that time. So, he came in, and I gave him about six songs to learn. He took them and drove down to visit his father in Mississippi for four or five days and started learning these songs. He came back, and we cut a couple of them: "Snakes Crawl at Night" and "The Atlantic Coastal Line." That was his first single.

**Paulson:** That's a pretty good start.

**Clement:** And I pitched it to Chet first, and he turned it down. He loved it. Everybody loved it. But I had told Chet, "I'm gonna do this." We had a big crowd in the studio that day. Word got out. Cowboy's going to record a black country singer. So, I played for Chet, and everybody loved it, but they passed on it. Then one day – I had an office in that building, the same building – I was down by the coffee machine one day. And he said – asked me if I'd done anything with it. I said, "No, I'm thinking about pressing it up and putting it out myself." He said, "Well, I've been thinking about that. We might be passing up another Elvis Presley. Yeah, I'll tell you what you do. I'm going to go to the A&R meeting in California next week. If you get me another lacquer – " that's a, you know, disk – he said, "I'll take it out and play it for them." He

did. And he did the same thing I had to do in my office. I'd play the record and then show them his picture. And they'd say, "No, the guy we just heard." "That's him." And they signed him.

**Paulson:** And you, together, the two of you had something like 51 top-10 records together.

**Clement:** Well, I did his first 20 albums, and he's been going ever since. But I did the first 20. And I've done two or three since then.

**Paulson:** Why do you think — I mean, it's a — it's almost a rhetorical question. Why do you think Jackie Robinson took so long to get to baseball? Why did it take so long for Charley Pride or someone like him to break into country music?

**Clement:** Nobody was doing it. He was the first.

**Paulson:** Right.

**Clement:** That I ever heard.

**Paulson:** Did, did the first records go out to radio stations without pictures?

**Clement:** They didn't — they decided — they, they debated about how to promote it. And to their credit, they decided — in my opinion — I think it was one of the first times, in my experience, that a big corporation waxed wise. They said, "It's a, it's a — this guy's great. He looks good; he sounds good. We're just gonna treat it like 'here's our brand-new artist.'" That's what they did. So, they didn't tell anybody. They weren't hiding it, but a lot of people didn't know it when he made his first appearances. His first appearance was in

Louisiana – Lafayette, Louisiana, I think. I wasn't there, but I heard about it from several people, including him. He walks out on the stage, and a hush falls over the crowd. He comes out with that nice, twangy voice of his. Said, "Well, I do have this sort of permanent suntan." He had them in the palm of his hand from then on.

**Paulson:** And it's –

**Clement:** There was never an incident. I was talking to Charley about that a year, or so, ago. There was never any kind of incident anywhere, any, you know?

**Paulson:** And the timing was probably right.

**Clement:** It was.

**Paulson:** Ten years earlier, it may not have worked.

**Clement:** But you got to remember, Charley Pride was a good-looking guy, and he had an amazing voice. The first time I heard him in the studio, I'd heard a little work tape. But when I heard him in the studio – wow, man. I said, "Them people, maybe they do really have an extra muscle in their vocal chords or something."

**Paulson:** I think we ought to let you play a little music now.

**Clement:** All right. [Plays and sings] Here's a song I didn't write, but my good buddy Allen Reynolds wrote it. "Here I go down that wrong road again. / Going back where I've already been. / Even knowing where it will end, / here I go down that wrong road again. / Well, I

can't seem to learn not to love you. / You get to me every time. / You're someone I just can't say "no" to. / You're so good at changing my mind. / Here I go down that wrong road again. / Going back where I've already been. / Even knowing where it will end, / here I go down that wrong road again. / Although I see the web that you're weaving, / you and your soft easy lines, / before I stop to think, I'm believing. / I'm falling for you one more time. / Here I go down that wrong road again. / Going back where I've already been. / Even knowing where it will end, / here I go down that wrong road again."

**Paulson:** All right. You've not, you have not been down too many wrong roads. You've had this path throughout your career where you worked with some of the best. I'm curious. As somebody's who's recognized as a terrific producer and who has worked with Chet Atkins and Sam Phillips and so many others, who were the best producers? I mean, who, who'd you learn the most from as a producer?

**Clement:** Well, Sam, because he was just totally – I mean, his whole thing was, "Bring me something different. Just be different." He didn't say, "You got to be right," or anything. Just be different. And there I am. Hey, that's right down my alley. So, it was kind of like there wasn't any – we made mistakes. We didn't know what not to do. We went ahead and did them sometimes, and sometimes those mistakes had a very positive outcome.

**Paulson:** Right.

**Clement:** So, a lot of it was just – we were free. We had freedom, which they don't have now.

**Paulson:** Although bands that are looking for that come to you. And the great story about U2 —

**Clement:** Uh-huh.

**Paulson:** — looking for you to help them record an album. Did you know U2 when they called?

**Clement:** I'd never heard of them at that time. Then this guy called me, and he said that they had a rock group, and they wanted to go record in Memphis in the old Sun Studio. I said, "You mean they got recording gear in there again?" "Yeah." "So, what they got?" "They've got an eight-track." I said, "Well, I'm not sure you can afford me." [Laughs] And he said, "Well, the group is U2," you know? "OK, fine."

**Paulson:** [Laughs]

**Clement:** "I'll let you know."

**Paulson:** They could afford you, Jack.

**Clement:** Yeah, right. So, I said, "I'll think about it; I'll let you know." And I — the first person I saw in my office, I say, "Have you ever heard of a group called U2?" "Oh, yes! The biggest rock and roll group in the world." Said, "They want me to come to Memphis and play in the old Sun Studio." "Do it." And that was great. It was a lot of fun. And I had a great time with U2.

**Paulson:** Yeah, that was a record called *Rattle and Hum*.

**Clement:** Yeah, I did about three, three of the tracks there. I helped them with it.

**Paulson:** Did it sound like Sun Studios still?

**Clement:** Yeah.

**Paulson:** Yeah? It could recapture –

**Clement:** It was exactly the same thing. Really a deja vu kind of thing for me. It's 25 or 30 years later after I was there. The room hadn't changed, and I'm in there with a four-piece band. Now, I'd never had a drummer as loud as old Larry Mullen, but it worked.

**Paulson:** You're still working for the Country Music Hall of Fame in, in a number of different ways. And you've got a band.

**Clement:** Mm-hmm. It's the best band I've ever had.

**Paulson:** Tell us about that.

**Clement:** Well, I'm 72 years old, and I'm still doing the same thing I was when I was 13 – getting up my latest band, my latest show. Well, I've been working with these guys for now – of course, the drummer – I've been working with him for 33 years, Kenny Malone. Piano player, Bobby Wood, known him since he was 15 back in Memphis 30 years ago, or – that was in the early, early '60s – 40 years ago. And he's great. And this great bass player named Dave Roe. And Shawn Camp, who's a whiz himself. And Billy Burnette. And they're part of the band. And we've got a steel player named Glenn Rieuf, who actually works at the Hall of Fame. That's seven. And now we're going to have Jay Patton on the saxophone, and he also plays mandolin and guitar and sings.

**Paulson:** That's a very impressive band.

**Clement:** And we'll have a fiddle or two and a banjo, so, we can do "Rocky Top," and we can do "Memphis." [Sings aggressive riff] You know?

**Paulson:** That's an orchestra you've got.

**Clement:** It is.

**Paulson:** It's Cowboy Jack's Ragtime Band?

**Clement:** It's called Cowboy's Ragtime Band.

**Paulson:** Terrific. Could we close out with one of your newer songs? Something you've written?

**Clement:** Yeah. [Plays and sings] S-e-r-i-o-u-s-l-y, I'm an l-o-n-e-s-o-m-e g-u-y. / Cross my h-e-a-r-t and hope to die. / S-e-r-i-o-u-s-l-y. / What kind of fool would make an angel cry? / Now it h-u-r-t-s me 'cause I was that guy. / And I know I was a b-a-d b-o-y. / But I'm sorry for the things I did that made you c-r-y, little darling. / S-e-r-i-o-u-s-l-y. I'm an l-o-n-e-s-o-m-e g-u-y. / But please, let's give it one more college t-r-y. / S-e-r-i-o-u-s-l-y."

**Paulson:** Wonderful. Our guest today has been "Cowboy" Jack Clement. Please join us again next week for "Speaking Freely