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FolkWax Sittin' In With Cowboy Jack Clement

The Guess Things Happen That Way Interview

Part One

By Arthur Wood

*This interview with **Cowboy Jack Clement**, the legendary studio owner/producer/songwriter/recording artist, took place on Monday August 23, 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 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.*

Arthur Wood for FolkWax: 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.



Cowboy Jack Clement & Johnny Cash
Photo By Marty Stuart

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.



Cowboy Jack on the Trombone

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 player's 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 Brothers 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-I-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.



Guess Things Happen That Way

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 [Jennings]**, 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 all right they loved my album.

*Last Thursday following the appearance of Part One of the Cowboy Jack Clement interview in FolkWax, I received e-mails from **Joe Gracey** and **Terry Clarke** commenting on the article. They demonstrated (to me) the power of music to connect people. Joe Gracey is based out of Austin, Texas and I had contacted him earlier that day regarding his wife, Kimmie Rhodes', latest solo album, Windblown (which we'll review in FolkWax ere long). Joe's initial message included, "I just got through reading your Cowboy interview. He's a gas ... I've known him since the early '70s and at one point he was going to produce a record on me, before I lost my voice" [Ed. Note: Throat cancer robbed Joe of his voice]. My reply of "So, you're a fan," brought the tribute, "Not only am I a fan, I consider myself to be a graduate of the Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa school of Production and Engineering. Jack is the most important mentor I have ever had, bar none. Meeting him literally changed the course of my life..."*

*Singer/songwriter Terry Clarke has English and Irish blood coursing through his veins. Currently residing in Scotland, he loves Austin, Texas, and possesses the soul of a poet. He sent the following, "Study your Rock 'n' Roll history books, L.P. sleeve notes, CD booklets ... and Jack Clement's name is writ large. From the genesis to the present, Memphis with **Sam Phillips** and Sun Records, with **Johnny Cash**, **Jerry Lee Lewis**, **Waylon Jennings** ... engineering, producing, writing, playing that rhythm guitar style of his. Joe Gracey in Austin - who is one of the greatest rhythm guitar players I know - told me once that Cowboy Jack taught him to play. Watching Jack perform at Douglas Corner in Nashville one night was an object lesson in how to write, sing, and play music. Still a handsome man with thick, swept-back silver hair, he took the stage and illustrated why I fell in love with this music as a ten-year-old boy." The foregoing? - proof, as if it was needed, that we live in a small world...*

Arthur Wood for FolkWax: The opening track is "No Expectations." Where had you heard the song back in the seventies?

Cowboy Jack Clement: **Jim Rooney** is the one that came up with that arrangement [Ed. Note. Working out of Cowboy Jack Clement's Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa, Rooney produced albums by **Nanci Griffith**, **Iris DeMent**, **Dave Mallett**, and **John Prine**]. **The Rolling Stones** play the song real slow. Totally different from the way I do it. Rooney did it pretty rocking, like I do, and it was always a good song to warm up the band with. It sort of evolved into the theme song for our band.

FW: You once cut "No Expectations" with Johnny Cash, and the track that follows, "Guess Things Happen That Way," is one of two #1 Country hit singles on the album that you penned and Cash cut back in the days when you were working at Sun Records. The other #1 song is "Ballad Of A Teenage Queen." What do you recall of writing those songs? Did they come to you quickly?

CJC: Pretty quick actually. I really wasn't thinking about **Johnny Cash** when I wrote either one of them. In the case "Ballad Of A Teenage Queen" I would go in and record a solo single myself, every once in a while. I had recorded the song, with the vocal group just like Cash did it. He heard my version, and wanted to record it and I figured, "Hell I can make some money doing that," so I let him do it. I never regretted it. He cut it like my arrangement, and I actually played the guitar on his version, the same way I played it on mine.

FW: It crossed my mind that you possibly included "No Expectations" and the two #1 hit singles as a fond remembrance of him.

CJC: It really didn't have anything to do with the fact he's gone. It's just that we had those songs. I had got him to come over to the house here about a year ago and put his voice on "Guess Things Happen That Way." He's on a track by himself. I just put him in there, and you can hear it if you know it's there. He makes some cute little comments at the end that I had him do - he says, "I don't like, I don't like it, I love it." "Ballad Of A Teenage Queen" was originally my record and he was guesting on a session I did, back in 1981. It laid around here all this time and when I was putting this album together I listened to it, and it was better than I thought it was, and he was singing good - and I was singing pretty good. I got **Kenny [Malone]** to play a little drums - very lightly, and I added a ukulele. That was about it. Those are the original vocals on that cut.

FW: So those tracks weren't a tribute?

CJC: I think I would have done it either way. Of course, every time I sing one of them songs or think of one of them songs, I think of him. We were dear friends and I miss him every day.

FW: On the album, there's another famous song you composed in the 1950's, "It'll Be Me." It started life as the B-Side of a #1 Country hit single for Jerry Lee Lewis.

CJC: And a #1 Rock 'n' Roll hit. Country, too.

FW: What do you recall of cutting "It'll Be Me" with Jerry Lee almost fifty years ago?

CJC: I never did like his version of it. He was reading it off a lyric sheet when we cut it. We cut it twice. I engineered it one time and then Sam engineered it [**Ed. Note.** Sam is Sam Phillips, the owner of Memphis-based Sun Studios and Sun Records]. My version was the one that was on the single, but then later on we put the other one on an album. They were both kind of good - a little different. I still think mine had a little more bounce to it. Neither one of them was what I wanted to hear.

FW: There's a couple of songs on the album that you co-wrote with Don Robertson. Tell us about him.

CJC: I first met him back in the late sixties when he was visiting and hanging out in Nashville. He stayed with a friend of mine, Jim Malloy, who used to be my main engineer at RCA. We were neighbours, and he introduced us. We started hanging out and then one time Don came to Nashville and stayed a month and we wrote a song called "Does My Ring Hurt Your Finger." **Charley Pride** cut it, but since I was a BMI writer and he was ASCAP, and you couldn't mix them back in those days, I just went ahead and put my wife's name on it. Anyway we got to be buddies and I would go visit him every time I went to California. Six or seven years ago, he moved to Nashville for a couple of years. During that time we wrote six or seven songs together. He's a real fun guy. He's a teetotaler now, but he's still fun. When he used to drink, he was a ball of laughs. He used to perform and made a few records for RCA. He's an amazing writer and has written all kinds of stuff like "Please Help Me I'm Falling," "Hummingbird," and "Born To Be With You," and a number of hits for **Elvis**. There's also an instrumental he wrote called "Happy Whistler" [Jack hums the melody] - and "I Really Don't Want To Know," just a whole ton of great songs. He's a great melody guy.

FW: There's a cover of Allen Reynolds' "Dreaming My Dreams With You" on your album. That's another song that you're associated with because Waylon Jennings cut it on an album you produced.

CJC: I always loved the song. I've been singing it for years. I used to publish the song, back when I cut it with Waylon. I don't publish it anymore, but that ain't got nothing to do with it, I still love the song. I

wanted to sing it, so I did. Mostly on this album I sing stuff I wanted to sing.

FW: Allen Reynolds is someone who you literally mentored at the outset of his career.

CJC: Yeah, we go all the way back to Sun Records. He was about nineteen at that time and going to college. I was producing some stuff with **Dickey Lee** at Sun Records and Allen was singing in his vocal group, **The Collegiates**. Even after I left Sun, the three of us would hang out - I was married at the time and they were single. We'd have a lot of cookouts at my house in Memphis, write songs, and then I'd published them. Next, I moved to Beaumont and built a studio. A few months later they came down, and we cut a big hit with Dickey called "Patches." Dickey wrote a thing called "She Thinks I Still Care" which I got cut by **George Jones**. Allen wrote a bunch of stuff, and we did very well with them as writers and me as publisher, for a long time. I moved them to Beaumont, after I'd been there, oh, less than a year. They stayed two or three years. When they went back to Memphis, I came to Nashville. About a year later, I had things going pretty well so I hired them as songwriters and moved them to Nashville.

FW: What did you think when you first heard Allen's "Dreaming My Dreams Of You"?

CJC: It was very special to me. It was very personal. That song is about what was happening in our lives at that time. Allen was getting a divorce, I'd started this record label, and it was kind of coming apart because I'd forgotten to sign **Don Williams** to a contract [**Ed. Note.** The label was JMI Records]. Things were sort of coming unglued. He wrote the first verse of that song and a month or so later he was driving to the beach in South Carolina, and that verse came to him - *"But I won't let it change me not if I can, I'd rather believe in love, And give it away as much as I can, To those I'm fondest of."* That verse always hit me between the eyes - or between the ears. I always loved the song and it's a beautiful melodic thing. It sounds good with accordions and stuff. I like accordions.

FW: "Every Place I've Ever Been" was written by you and a Democrat from Georgia. In fact, Zell Miller is currently the senator for Georgia.

CJC: He and I are big buddies. I met him about a month after he became governor of Georgia. That must have been about twelve or thirteen years ago. I was down there singing at the Governor's

Mansion. It turned out Zell Miller was a big fan of mine and had bought my first album when it came out. He always knew what songs I wrote. He's a huge Country music fan. He knows more about George Jones than I do. We hit it off immediately. I was sitting at the table with him before I got up and sang, and asked, "How do you like it so far" - meaning about being governor, and he said, "Well, I could do without it." He had me hooked from then on. I wound up going down there many times while he was governor. In fact I spent more nights in the Governor's Mansion during that eight years than anybody but him and his wife. I took a bunch of people down there and did shows in his ballroom. Zell was here in the house about a week before he became senator. He was sort of retired at the time and happy as a lark. That song is about him. It's his story. He always wanted to go back home to the mountains of Northern Georgia. He came up with that line *"Every place I've ever been has been on my way back home."* One time I was down in Atlanta and he took the morning off and we went into his den and started writing that song.



Guess Things Happen That Way

FW: Did I misjudge "Drinking Carrot Juice," because I thought it was a little whimsical?

CJC: Yeah, I would say it's a little whimsical. I've always written novelty songs. For instance "I've Been Flushed From The Bathroom Of Your Heart," "Dirty Old Egg Sucking Dog," and "The One On The Right, Is On The Left." At the time I wrote the song, I was drinking carrot juice. I found out if you want the juice to be really fresh you've got to make it every day. You got to get these carrots and scrub them down real good. It makes a mess, but you need to do it every day or that stuff will sit in the refrigerator and congeal. I was getting my wife

at the time to make that stuff and she hated it. Anyway, that was back in the seventies when I wrote that thing. I'd whip it out and play it for somebody every once in a while. That's one of the favourite songs on the album I think.

FW: The closing track on the album, "Off To Join The World," was written by Shawn Camp [and Mark D. Sanders]. Lyrically that song also possesses a degree of whimsy.

CJC: Yeah, well - I had cut that song with Shawn. I thought, "Well, I could sing that." I asked Shawn if it would be all right if I did. He said, "Sure." First of all, I was going to put my voice on his track that I had cut with him. Then I decided, "I'll just cut my own." I was going to lower the key, Shawn sings it in A and I was going to do it in G. Then I decided I ought to do it in A, and I ought to just go ahead and cut my own track, which I did.

FW: The last song that I was going to ask about was the one you co-wrote with Mike Elliott. It has a real Country music title, "Leavin' Is The Lovin' Thing (To Do)." There's a Jazz guitarist from Chicago with that name. Is that the guy you wrote the song with?

CJC: Yeah. He's from Minneapolis, actually. He lived in for, I don't know, eight or ten years. We used to work a lot together on stuff. One time I got him to teach me a bunch of Jazz chords. I don't know, he wrote a little of the melody on that tune. That was sometime in the nineties. A lot of these songs have been sitting around, because I haven't been very active as a publisher in a while. I always thought that song could be a hit for somebody.

Arthur Wood is a founding editor of FolkWax. He would love to hear your comments about this article at folkwax@visnat.com.



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