

Jack Clement – The Ides of June by Larry Wayne Clark

Let me state unequivocally at the beginning: you don't interview Jack Clement. Not really. You experience him. The journey is convoluted, fascinating, full of curves and surprises and, eventually, you surrender to it, knowing as you do that you are thus gaining entry to a privileged club whose members can be found in Nashville, Memphis, Texas and places further abroad: now you are one of those who will, when the moment is right and the audience deserving, have a "Cowboy" Jack story or two to tell.

And what stories they are.

The Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa is located in a large, handsome residential building on Belmont Avenue, in a comfortable Nashville neighborhood bordered by Belmont University and Music Row. The building serves as both Clement's home and headquarters for his various publishing, recording and digital editing enterprises (what the "hotel" refers to is a mystery). The list of studio clients is diverse and impressive, and includes Johnny Cash, Townes Van Zandt, John Prine, Marty Stuart and Tom Paxton.

Arriving for my 10 a.m. appointment on a sunny day in late September, I discover there's no need to knock. The front door is wide open and in the process of being painted, portending the congenial hive of activity waiting within. I'm greeted by Mary (who also works part time for Allen Reynolds). Dominating the vestibule is a wooden rocking horse of such proportions that any child placed upon it would risk a death fall. In an adjacent room two men work at computer screens; this is the digital editing suite. Gold and platinum record albums gleam on several walls. Clement appears, shakes my hand, and ushers the way further into the building's interior.

He's a man in his early 70s with a penchant for vividly patterned Hawaiian shirts. He's tall and walks very erectly. The bright shirt may drape a slight mid-body paunch but the legs are long and slender (he is, after all, a ballroom dancer). He has a full head of creamy white hair and alert blue eyes. His countenance is friendly and vaguely reminiscent of the late actor Peter Ustinov in a comic role. He smiles little but an air of impishness prevails.

His office is generous in size and brightened by a long window, along the outside stone ledge of which Eugene the cat will come walking when the mood suits him, as it indeed will during the course of my visit, inspiring what seems to be a routine of sorts: Clement, seated at his desk, opens the window to admit the animal who is somewhat of a local star in his own right, being that near anomaly: a trained cat. "Eugene — showtime!" The cat leaps onto the credenza. "Sit, Eugene." Eugene sits. "Give me five!" says Clement, extending an open hand. Eugene looks bored. The order is repeated. Eugene lifts a paw and places it in the open hand. I'm impressed. Clement puts his face next to the cat who nuzzles him, for which he receives a Pounce treat from a desk drawer.

Various instruments — two guitars, two ukuleles and a vintage Dobro — hang on the walls of the office. Against another wall stand two mammoth Klipsch speakers and a big-screen television. There are photos everywhere — a very young Clement in Marine uniform standing guard as Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip descend an airplane ramp in Washington, D.C. circa 1950; Clement and Jerry Lee Lewis in the Sun studio control room; Clement posing with a multi-accordioned polka band, holding a curious looking five-stringed instrument. On his desk is an array of conductor's batons, one of which will occasionally be waved later as we listen to music.

As Eugene the wonder cat, now duly rewarded and dismissed, disappears, we turn to other things.

Clearly, Jack Clement has much on this mind. He's reached that sad point in life when a man begins to see his friends succumbing to the ravages of time, and Clement's friends have included many legendary figures. Chet Atkins. Waylon Jennings. Sam Phillips. June Carter Cash, and — mere days before this interview — The Man In Black himself, one of Clement's bosom pals and an icon whose passing has stunned Nashville's music community. Even more recently, the death of actor-singer Sheb Wooley, another friend and occasional collaborator, has reached the news.

And yet there are heartening developments at hand too. At an age when many are content to retire, Clement is busy rehearsing a 10-piece band to perform in the Ford Theater of the new Country Music Hall of Fame. Between band sets, further entertainment will be offered in the form of videos, culled from Clement's famous trove of home movies, newly transferred onto DVD in his own editing facility.

Clement gives the past its due and no more. He does not wallow in stale glories — he's having way too much fun right now. Nevertheless, his is a history that demands examination. Considered one of Nashville's true geniuses, his accomplishments are staggering. Studio builder, archivist, ukulele manufacturer, failed movie mogul, hit songwriter, recording artist (All I Want To Do In Life, his 1978 Elektra/Asylum album, will soon be re-released on CD), comedian, ballroom dancer, and of course engineer-producer to the stars. He was the Sun Records employee who auditioned Jerry Lee Lewis and later recorded "Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On" and other classic hits. It was Clement who had the savvy to turn on a microphone that day at Sun when the "Million Dollar Quartet" spontaneously gathered around the piano. He wrote, played on, and recorded early Johnny Cash successes like "Ballad Of A Teenage Queen" and "Guess Things Happen That Way," and, years later, was the uncredited producer of "Ring Of Fire." Nomadic, mercurial and creatively fearless, over the years he has been a mentor to songwriters Dickey Lee, Allen Reynolds, Bob McDill and a lazy-voiced Texan named Don Williams. He was the visionary producer who took a chance on Charley Pride at a time when the very idea of an African-American country star seemed preposterous, leading the singer along a career path that included over 50 Top Ten hits.

Our conversation, which will ping-pong around many things, begins with a mention of Allen Reynolds, who recently introduced me to Clement at the Bluebird Café.

Well, now there's one of my favorite songwriters. He's written a lot with other people, but he's written stuff by himself. I think a guy oughta always be able to write one by himself if he wants to. I never did like co-writing much 'cause I don't like to regiment it that way. I've got to be in a certain kind of mood before I'm gonna write a song. But when I get in that mood I might write a letter, and never send it. Or I might write in my unfinished book. I'm writing a book but I may never finish it. But I write in it occasionally.

I bet somebody'll write a book *about* you.

Well, I've got the first four chapters. They'll tell you a little bit about me, 'cause it tells you a lot about Johnny Cash.

One time I decided I was gonna write a poem. Not a song. I wanted to write a poem about Johnny Cash *for* Johnny Cash. So I did. That was in 1991; that was about the only thing I wrote in 1991. I don't write many songs anymore. I might get back to it but I got too much other stuff on my mind right now.

I'm 72 years old and I'm doing the same thing I was when I was 17 — 13! I'm gettin' up my latest band, puttin' on my latest show. This time I'm gonna do it at the Country Music Hall of Fame starting on October 6th. Every Monday night during the month of October. My band consists of Kenny Malone on drums, you know him? He's been my number one drummer for 33 years. And I got Bobby Wood on piano.

I know Bobby.

Who I've known since he was 15, back in Memphis. That was in the early '60s, I guess. He could only play in C and G, sorta, back then but what he played he played real well. See, he's a special case: he learned his craft in recording studios. He never really learned how to read music, he just learned how to *do* it. In the studio. That's what he was doing when I first met him. I had a little studio there and my partner was Stan Kessler. Little studio in Memphis called Echo Recording.

This was after your time with Sun Records?

Yeah, I was actually working with Chet Atkins during that time. I'd come over [to Nashville] two or three days a week and work with all the people he didn't wanna fool with. I got tired of that after a year but, during that time, I had this little studio. Which they knew about. I was on a sort of consultant basis so that I could have my publishing company and my little studio. Both of which were good for him because I wrote songs and Chet would produce 'em, like "Miller's Cave" for Bobby Bare and then Hank Snow. No, it was Hank Snow first.

[long pause] I need to get back to writing. I did write a few songs five or six years ago with a guy named named Don Robertson. You've probably heard of him? Now there's a good songwriter.

So who else is in this band?

A bass player named Dave Roe. Acoustical bass. And then there's Shawn Camp.

He plays everything!

He plays everything, and sings. And I got Billy Burnette, who plays guitar real well and sings. He's got a big, blonde — [indicates Gibson jumbo acoustic guitar on the wall] — see, I bought that Gibson J200 in 1951...

It's gorgeous.

You wanna hear it? [takes guitar down from the wall] I just had Guy Clark tweak it. Guy Clark's the best little guitar tweaker...

I've been over to Guy's guitar workshop.

He tweaked it one time about 25 years ago. [looks at the guitar in his lap] Boy, if this guitar could talk! — but anyway, he tweaked it one time and it sounded wonderful. And then it got to where I couldn't get it to sound right so I took it over to his house and he tweaked it [plays an arpeggio then begins to strum vigorously].

Sounds huge!

You can put it in a room with a nine-foot grand piano and not get drowned out.

I heard you play that Dobro one night over at the Douglas Corner Café. Shawn Camp may have been part of that show. You were playing a fair bit of Dobro that night.

There's a cut on Johnny Cash — that album right there? — that got me a gold record just 'cause I played the Dobro on one cut. It was "We'll Meet Again" [on *American IV: The Man Comes Around*]. I've done about three or four albums with Johnny Cash in my studio upstairs, which is all wired into here. See, everybody's got a studio in their house now but I've been doing it long enough that I've got a panel [removes wall panel to show microphone jacks]; you can plug in up to eight mikes and it goes upstairs. And I've got a couple of headphone circuits there [moving around the room, indicating].

And I've got this little box over there, got a phone on it, and I can sit over here and talk to a cameraman, watch it on my TV screen and talk to everybody with that.

What's your connection with video? What's all that about?

I just always wanted to make a movie. I *made* a movie one time, in 1970, feature-length motion picture starring Agnes Moorehead, Will Geer, who was Papa Walton [on TV's *The Waltons*], Michael Ansara, who always played Cochise and was married to Barbara Eden [*I Dream of Jeannie* star], and a fella named Dennis Patrick that was in the hit movie *Joe*. And a good script and everything, but I let the guy that wrote it talk me into letting him direct it. Anyway, the movie fell very short of my expectations.

It was a horror movie about axe murders and stuff, you know. Had to rent this big ol' mansion out in Brentwood, turn their swimming pool into a lily pond and build a mausoleum around their goldfish pond, lay down a brick walkway on a Sunday. We had Agnes Moorehead scheduled to come in a couple of weeks later [but] she was still doing that show *Bewitched* so she had to come in the first day of shooting. That first day I found out what making a movie's about — it's a scavenger hunt! I had people running all over town trying to find props and paint things and, you know, get ready. That's how my movie started [laughs].

Anyway, I learned a bit about making movies. I learned enough about it to know that, if you're gonna do a movie, you oughta get a producer who knows what he's doing. I didn't know beans about it when I started. I figured I could wing it, which I did.

How expensive a lesson was it?

About six hundred grand. [Chuckles] Well, five hundred for the movie and then I spent another hundred going to the Astrodome with two film cameras and filming Charley Pride.

Well, I've still got that and it's still good. I've collected footage. I've got a lot of footage.

I'll bet you've got some great stuff of Johnny Cash.

I got all kinds of great stuff with Johnny Cash. I got a shot of him out in the driveway crawling feet first into a Ferrari, showing you how to get into it. Then he opens the door and crawls out, shows you how to get out of it!

Not an image I have of Johnny Cash!

Oh, I got some other stuff. I got him sitting in that chair with this thing here on [produces a rubber pig's snout with an elastic band] talking about how pigs can see the wind and stuff. And he goes [holds the snout over his face], "You know, pigs can see the wind." It's really cute.

Last time he was here, that's the day he came over — about a year ago — he came over to cut that song, "We'll Meet Again." With Thom Bresh, who's a wonderful guitar player.

I've heard that. The old standard.

[sings] "We'll Meet Again..." One of my favorite songs. *Dr. Strangelove* is one of my favorite movies. You saw that, right?

Yeah, it's in that. Vera Lynn sang it.

Yeah. [now fingerpicking the guitar, sings the entire song in a plaintive baritone reminiscent of Burl Ives] Johnny Cash always sung that song. Shoulda heard him sing "The Whiffenpoof Song."

Allen Reynolds said Johnny Cash probably knew ten thousand songs.

That's what I'm talking about. Stuff you'd never think about Johnny Cash sitting around singing, like "The Whiffenpoof Song," or Ink Spots songs. I think the thing I really loved most about Johnny Cash — there's many things — but he never got jaded. He never got to a point where he wouldn't just pick up a guitar and play with anybody, you know.

I'm kinda jaded.

But you still like to pick up the guitar and play!

But I'm particular who I play with, you know.

But you're still playing the Bluebird. I think it's amazing. You've outlived Johnny Cash, and you're moving forward into a new venture and, like you say, talking like a 17-year-old...

Thirteen. That's what I was doing when I was 13, gettin' up a band. When I was 17 I went in the Marine Corps.

How long were you in the Marines?

Four years.

Give us a little of your chronology. You dad was...?

He worked in a jewelry store. He was like assistant treasurer or something.

I thought I read in a bio somewhere that he was a dentist.

No, his father was a dentist.

Your grandfather.

And his father's father was a doctor. He came from a wealthy family, my grandfather did, but he married this Irish girl and he got cut off in the will. But he managed to get through dental school anyway, and then they had about 12 kids down in the little town of Louisville, Mississippi — not Lou-*ee*-ville, Lou-*iss*-ville. It's way down there, little small town. And of course he did the whole country dentist thing — take hams and stuff [as payment], money when he could get it. But he did well. He had cash flow, enough that his favorite thing to do was sit up on his backporch and have a cocktail or something and watch his "boys" out there working in his fields. A gentleman farmer type, you know. Kinda like me, really. Me and my grandfather — I can identify with him pretty well from what my father told me. I love to get a band, sit around and have a cocktail and hear my band. [In a stentorian manner]: "*Boys!* All right, boys — let's do

‘Brazil!’ Where’s my baton? [rummages among desk items] I need to get me another baton. I’ve got several. [Chooses one, swivels his chair to face the huge speakers]: A-one-two, one-two... [begins singing “Brazil”].

Let me play you a track I got on that. [Finds a CD] This is one we did upstairs, but we overdubbed a horn or two. This thing at the Hall of Fame’s gonna start with about a 10-piece band. I think I’m gonna have a couple of horns; might be four by the end of the fourth week. We’ll see how it goes.

Anyway, worktape of “Brazil...” [plays CD at near-deafening volume, hollers “samba!” and begins to dance, very skillfully, by himself]

[song ends] Pretty rockin’, huh?

That’s quite the thing!

[sorting through papers, hands me a sheet] Here’s my ten tips for songwriters. You can have a copy of that. You might want to quote from it.

[The page reads]:

Pineapple Jack Clement’s Ten Tips For Songwriters

1. Remember that experts are often wrong.
2. Experts tend to be narrow and overly opinionated.
3. Experts don’t buy records.
4. There’s nothing wrong with waltzes if they’re played right.
5. A good song gets better with age
6. Reveal some of yourself with most of your songs.
7. Don’t get stuck on one song too long. Work on other songs as you go.
8. Learn how to grow from setbacks, delays and getting your feelings hurt.
9. Write the worst song you can think of.
10. Write the best song you can think of.

Well, you do like your waltzes. You always play that Allen Reynolds waltz...

“Dreaming My Dreams.” I love that song. I did that with Waylon, you know. Produced the album it’s on, called *Dreaming My Dreams*.

Where do you get this restlessness that drives you? You’ve been in Memphis, Beaumont, Texas, here. Is that something you got from your grandfather?

Well, I forgot to tell you the rest of about doing the same thing I was doing when I was 13. I’m getting up my latest band and show and going around telling everybody that country music needs to start over. Trying to reinvent country music. If I gotta go to Texas every once in a while, I’ll do that. If I have to go to Cleveland every once in a while to get a polka fix, I’ll do *that!* [sings] “Just another polka/Just another polka/But oh, what a girl in my arms...”

I got a bunch of polka tracks. I got a whole bunch of unfinished tapes around here.

I’ll bet you do.

I even got one by Louis Armstrong.

I heard there was a Louis Armstrong connection. How did that come about?

Oh, this friend of mine, Ivan Mogel, who used to be my foreign subpublisher, was in town one time around 1969 or '70, and we were somewhere eating lunch and they had a TV in there and Louis came on. He said, "Why don't we cut a country album with Louis?"

"Yeah. How do we get to him?"

He knew him. Knew him since he was 13 or something. Says, "I can set that up." And so he did. I went to New York and took a band, cut an album with Louis Armstrong. Bunch of country songs, with a steel guitar and everything. But it's on Avco Embassy and they didn't know what to do with it, so it's really pretty obscure. I never was that happy with it anyway.

Nineteen seventy was a big year for you. The movie...

Yeah, I was into everything. I had two studios down the street.

Jack's Tracks.

That was later. That was the third studio. I've built a bunch of studios. About eight or nine, depending on whether you call this one two or one.

For a creative guy you're pretty technical.

I'm not all that technical. I get other people to do all that stuff.

When did you write your first song?

When I was in the Marine Corps.

What was it? Do you remember it?

No. I don't. It may have been... I don't even remember the name of it. And I don't know where them songs are. I was doing guard duty in Washington, D.C. at a place called Marine Barracks.

I have a hard time imagining you in the Marines. You don't seem like somebody who would respond well to that sort of micro-managed discipline.

Well, you go with the flow. I was always able to get away with a lot of stuff.

So you came out of there and...

Went right into playing music in that area for a year or so. But before I got out [of the service], I had organized a band. I found the Stoneman Family living out in Carmody Hills, Maryland, right across the D.C. line, and they were living there with an outdoor toilet and everything. It was like a whole little settlement of hillbillies out there. So I met this fabulous Stoneman Family and Scott Stoneman, you know, just a wonderful fiddler, singer, comedian, everything, and he had a brother who played bass who was a musical genius. He used to have epileptic fits. He knew when it was coming; he'd lay his bass down and disappear. [People] thought it was part of the act.

But Scott Stoneman was the first musician I ever got hung up on. You know, you get hung up on certain musicians: you've heard them, that's who you want [in the band]. Then they get you hooked!

Wasn't Ernest Stoneman...

That's the daddy.

...part of the whole Bristol recording sessions [landmark field recordings of 1927]?
Absolutely. He was right there the first day.

So there was quite a historic connection there.

Mm-hm. But anyway, then we found Buzz Busby. Scott found Buzz, who was 19 years old, working at the FBI in the fingerprint department. And he played mandolin, wonderfully well, and sang high tenor. And so, when I got out of the Corps I had me and Scott and his brother Jimmy, and Buzz Busby. Then we immediately started playing gigs, starting at North Beach during summer. I got out June the 15th and we went down and played in North Beach.

What were you playing?

I was playing guitar and singing, and sometimes I'd play bass. I even played steel some. And then we had this neat deal on Saturday, every Saturday at a place called the Charles Hotel in southern Maryland — Ollie Olsen's Charles Hotel. He had bands in there every Saturday night, so we got that job. That was a nice gig. And they'd run spots on the radio and stuff so I started getting a little bit known around Washington, D.C. It was called Jack Clement & His Tennessee Troupers. My father came up with that idea.

How did the Sun Records thing come about? You were very involved in that.

All right, let me give you a quick chronology. Went in the Marine Corps at age 17. Parris Island [South Carolina] for about three months, then Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for about 18 months. That's where I did guard duty all the time, so I became classified as an MP. That's the reason I didn't go to Korea later. They weren't gonna take MPs in the first wave.

Lucky you!

Yeah, well, I kinda missed all them guys. They shipped all of us out but 80. But anyway, then I wound up in Washington, D.C., which was really some good duty. It's a special place. It occupies one city block. It's on Eighth Street, about eight blocks *that* way and three blocks *that* way from the Capitol Building. Streetcars going everywhere. I'm 19 when I got there. Beautiful girls all over the place working in all these government offices and stuff. Hillbilly joints all over town. It was a real hillbilly town.

Washington?

Yeah. Jimmy Dean was playing at the Dixie Pig. Roy Clark was always at the Famous (we got a job playing the Famous on Sunday night sometimes). A place called Casablanca. The Rendezvous in Maryland, Virginia. There's a lot of hillbillies around!

It was just a great place to be, and the whole thing took up one city block with a parade ground right in the middle. Barracks over here. Commandant of the Marine Corps lived in this big house at the end of the parade ground. And back over here was the gate, and then this building where the Marine band rehearsed — the *big* Marine band, you know, Sousa's band. Boy, were they good! I'd go in the room where they rehearsed, listen to them. I got to know a couple of the band guys. And then they had the drum & bugle corps, and the drill team. And I was on the drill team. We drilled, but we also did a lot of other shit details, you know, funerals. I might be out in and out of dress blues three times in one day.

But anyway, I'm on the main gate. I did that a lot. Like 12 to four in the morning — ain't nobody coming through much — and they had a little guard shack and a little desk in there. And one night I wrote a song. Got the words; next morning I got my guitar and sung it. Then I sung it to the boys in the barracks and they liked it. So I got to doing that, you know, sitting there 12 to four at night, nothin's happening. Course, one time the colonel came through and I didn't get up to salute him; I just sorta waved him through. [laughs] I got a little reprimand for that.

We were in show business! We did all kinds of things with the drill team. We went to New York and drilled on *The Lucky Strike Hit Parade*. We drilled in Yankee Stadium several times. One time we drilled at half time with the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. All kinds of stuff like that. Ride around on the bus. Then I got to writing these parodies that we'd sing on the bus, mostly about old Sergeant Jones who was the drillmaster. Sergeant James W. Jones. Boy, did I put him on!

That's interesting: you were in the Marines but you were an entertainer.

Exactly. Jones would lay awake at night dreaming up these things for us to try. Some of them wouldn't work, some of them did. We were out rehearsing and it was fun. Like doing a show: we're gonna learn these numbers.

Still seems light years away from playing bluegrass and mountain music.

Well, I had good rhythm. That's the reason I did well on the drill team. Marching, you know, it's like... I wasn't a dancer at that time, didn't dance a lick [but] later on, I went and became an Arthur Murray dance instructor. And that was easy because I'd been on the drill team. I knew my left from my right and my hat from my glove, et cetera. So I fell right into that dancing thing; six weeks later, man, I'm an instructor. Tango, everything.

But the drill team, it was wonderful. And then, you know, cabs were cheap or you'd get a streetcar, or you walked downtown. I walked down there a lot. We'd walk down to the Smithsonian, walk on past that to the Washington Monument, and then *run* all the way up the stairs!

Boy, I miss the Marine Corps.

[suddenly swivels around to the sound system and inserts a CD] "Sing, Louis!"

Louis Armstrong?

Unfinished tape of Louis. [music starts] Still working on it; this is a mix I did seven or eight years ago. [Armstrong's unmistakable voice begins reciting the words to The Youngbloods' "Get Together"] The only thing that's left of the original is his voice [sings along with Armstrong until song finishes].

That actually works remarkably well. I couldn't have imagined that in a million years. ["Almost Persuaded" begins now, Armstrong half-singing, half-speaking] **Did he know these songs?**

[turns music down] I sent him 26 songs to pick from, to pick 12. I got to the session, I said, "Louis, you like any of them songs?"

"I like 'em *all*."

I said, "Oh. Well, you got some favorites?"

"No, I like 'em all! Any one you want me to sing."

"Okay. Sing...this one."

“Okay! That’s one of my *real* favorites.

So I had this piano player named Larry Butler, who went on to produce a lotta records, and we’re in New York, in the studio. Took the band from here, had Louis for four, five days. What a treat. I learned a lot that week, about jazz and stuff, you know. What’s jazz, really? It’s *Louis*! Whatever Louis is. He was just a real natural.

It all had a country flavor, and it was called *Louis Armstrong - Country & Western*. Had a picture of him with a cowboy hat, chaps and stuff. If I had that one to do over I wouldn’t let ’em call it nothin’. I’d just *do* it.

You seem to defy category yourself. Probably the big problem with music these days is it’s too narrowly pigeonholed. There was a time when that didn’t happen so much. I mean, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Ray Charles...

Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis.

Is it true you didn’t think all that much of Cash when you first met him? You thought his stuff was...

No, no, no. Let me tell you the real story.

I got back to Memphis — I guess I was going to college and stuff — and he got on Sun Records in 1955. I think that’s when it was. And he had a radio show there prior to that, and I used to listen to him on the radio. And I thought he was awful. Then I heard his first record and I didn’t like it at all — what was it? “Hey Porter” or “Cry, Cry, Cry” or something. The first couple of records just didn’t appeal to me, you know. They do *now*. I’d been in a different thing and I was coming from a different place. It was a little too crude for me, you know, at that time. Now I love it.

But when he came out with “I Walk The Line,” then I was hooked. He had me from then on. So the day I met him I was already a fan. “I Walk The Line” was his current release and it was kinda tapering off. It was real big for seven or eight months, so it was sort of reaching its end by the time I first met John. It was a week or two after I went to work for Sun on June 15th, 1956.

I went in the Marine Corps on the 15th, got out on the 15th, went to work at Sun June the 15th. That’s the reason I remember it.

That’s weird.

It’s easy to remember, you know. The ides of June.

So anyway, by the time I met Johnny Cash I really wanted to meet him. But when I met him I found out what a funny character he is and everything. We took up together immediately. But to say I didn’t like him...

I didn’t mean personally...

Well no, I’ve been *quoted* — somebody sent me a book they’re writing, wanted me to read it. I hated to read it because it says I didn’t like “I Walk The Line.” I *still* love “I Walk The Line”; it’s one of my all-time favorite songs! I’m gonna cut it as a samba. [apropos to nothing as he reaches for the guitar] — I got some tapes up there of Vic Damone singing country. Unfinished. — [strums a chord, sings and hums “I Walk The Line” in samba fashion; seques into “Brazil,” then Rocky Top,” humming and singing]

Boy, you're ready to get that band out there, I can tell!

I'm waiting on them.

[strums again] I'll tell you about the songs that Don Robertson and I wrote. Now Don, he's written a whole lotta big songs, including "Please Help Me I'm Falling," "I Really Don't Want To Know," "I Don't Hurt Anymore"...

Gorgeous melodies.

Oh yeah. He's a melody guy. Well, he was here about six years ago, I guess, and we wrote four, five, six songs. And they're all good. Here's one of 'em.

[Strums 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 darlin'

S-E-R-I-O-U-S-L-Y
I'm an L-O-N-E-S-O-M-E G-U-Y
So please let's give it one more college C-R-Y
S-E-R-I-O-U-S-L-Y

I'm not K-I-D-D-I-N-G this time
S-E-R-I-O-U-S-L-Y

[applauding] **How much of a recording career as an artist did you have?**

I did two or three singles for Sun. And I did a single or two for RCA. I did a couple of things on Bill Hall's label, mostly novelty things.

You seem to be drawn to those on the one hand and, on the other, some really serious and poignant stuff.

Well hey, that's the way life is, you know. Have a few laughs here and there and a good cry every once in a while.

The comedy mask and the drama mask.

Yeah, right. I always wrote novelties. And people used to ask me, "Why do you fool with that stuff? You can't make no money at it. If you're gonna write a song, write a *song*." Like I say there [indicates Ten Tips For Songwriters], "Write the worst song you can think of; write the best song you can think of."

One day Johnny Cash came over and said, "I wrote the worst song I can think of. It's called 'Beans For Breakfast.'" It's really one of the best songs he ever wrote.

It's all perspective, isn't it?

Point is, if you wanna write a song write a song. If it ain't no good tear it up, throw it away. Probably get a line or something, or idea, that gets the juices going. That's my advice to songwriters: just write, you know.

So anyway, I'd write these novelties and people'd say, "You'll never make any money." Well, Johnny Cash cut "Dirty Old Egg-Sucking Dog" and "Flushed From The Bathroom Of Your Heart" on the Folsom Prison album and at that time I owned the publishing on both of them, and the writing. I think the album sold eight, ten million records or something. Couple of my biggest money makers: "Dirty Old Egg-Sucking Dog" and "Flushed From The Bathroom Of Your Heart"! [chuckles] So there you go.

Sheb Wooley, "Purple People Eater." One of my favorite records when I was a kid; I just about wore a hole in a 78 I had.

I had to make a speech at his funeral.

I did a couple of albums with him as "Ben Colder" and one as Sheb Wooley, I think. I did a lot of writing with him but they were parodies. I think "Almost Persuaded #2" was the biggest thing I did with him. I helped him write it. We sat out by the pool at the old Capitol Park Inn and did that all one summer. I was getting a divorce at the time and living at the Capitol Park Inn and he'd come into town to record. Everybody would come by there either to eat or have a drink, and a lot of people stayed there when they came to town to record. It was a real gathering place; it's gone now.

I remember seeing all kinds of people. One thing sticks out particularly: well, Ray Stevens was around there a lot. Back then he was a guy you hired to write string parts and stuff. And we were talking about an eight-track [recording deck] one day. None of us had ever seen one. He said, "If we had an eight-track we could overdub the *world!*" On eight-track, you know. Now people sneeze right through that.

But look at all the great stuff that got cut on mono.

Sure. That's all I ever had at Sun was mono.

You know, it just astonishes me when I think of that Sun period that you were a part of, with Cash and Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis. How did that happen?

Charlie Rich...

It's just phenomenal. In all of popular music history, that has to be phenomenal.

Don't forget Roy Orbison was around for a while. Carl Perkins.

Orbison's greatest period happened after Sun. He didn't really discover himself there.

Well, he... See, I liked him. He was the first guy Sam [Phillips] let me work with when I first went there. Of course, I'd produced a record on Billy Lee Riley which was what got me my job there. And it came out on Sun, so I immediately started working with Billy Lee, which Sam encouraged, and then he gave me Roy Orbison to work with. This was after he'd done "Ooby Dooby." Well, I got to liking ol' Roy and we hung out a lot together and partied. But he was wanting to do stuff that we couldn't do then — slick, kinda like what he did later. He was wanting choirs and strings and all this fancy production.

So he had that in his head at that time?

Absolutely. And I told him I didn't think he'd ever make it as a ballad singer. [laughs] He never let me forget that either.

How about Jerry Lee Lewis. What was he like to be around?

He was a lotta fun back then. He was wonderful. I'd been there about three, four months when he came in. Let's see. I was back there tinkering around, messing around — I was always in there experimenting with echo or ways to mike the piano, et cetera — and Sally up front came back and said, "There's this guy here says he plays piano like Chet Atkins." I said, "Oh yeah? I wanna hear that; send him on back." So he comes back, sits down at the spinet piano and plays "Wildwood Flower." And it sounded like Chet Atkins. I said, "Well, that's nice. You sing?"

"Yeah."

"Well, sing me something." He used to sing a George Jones song, "Window Up Above." Remember that? And "Seasons Of My Heart" — [sings] "The seasons come, the seasons go/You get a little sunshine, rain and snow..." At that point, people were not really into country music. About the only one who was really selling with any excitement was George Jones.

Anyway, that first day I recorded some stuff. Just him and the piano. And it was great but it wasn't rock 'n' roll. And I told him, "Country ain't happening right now; you need to learn some rock'n' roll."

So he went back home, and just about the time I was fixin' to call him he showed up one day, about a month after the first time. And he'd written a song called "End Of The Road," which was kinda rockin'. Better than that, he'd come up with a version of a Gene Autry song called "You're The Only Star In My Blue Heaven," which was a waltz — [sings] "You're the only star in my blue heaven/And you're shining just for me..." Jerry Lee sat down at the piano [shouts boogie woogie style]: "*Bom-bom-BOM!* You're the only star in my blue heaven!..."

All *right*, man! Now you got it! That's when I said — this was on either Monday or Tuesday — I said, "If you'll be in here Thursday I'll get some musicians and we'll cut some tapes."

"Okay."

So that Thursday Sam Phillips was driving to Nashville to go up to the annual music convention, and Jerry Lee showed up. I had Roland Janes, and Billy Lee Riley, and J.M. Van Eaton on the drums, and we cut those songs: "End Of The Road," "You're The Only Star In My Blue Heaven," and maybe something else. We were about to quit, and I said, "You know 'Crazy Arms'?"

"I know a little of it."

Well, now at that time "Crazy Arms" had been a big hit for six months by Ray Price — huge hit — and the Andrews Sisters did it and had a big pop hit. So it was really on the down slope. I said, "Let's do it." I think it was one take and, at the time he did it, the other guys thought we were just messing around. One of them was in the bathroom that was in the control room, that little half bathroom. I think it was Riley. He was supposed to have been playing the bass that day. And I don't know where Roland was. So there was wasn't anything on the record but a drum and a piano. At the very end of it, Billy Lee walks in the studio thinking we was goofing off, messing around, picks up the electric guitar and hits a little off chord on it. Which stayed on the record — *twang!*

That was “Crazy Arms.” That was his first record. Put it out and it sold about a hundred-forty, hundred-fifty thousand, you know, just in a few areas. And, of course, the second record was “A Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going On.”

And the rest is history.

And that’s when I learned about backsides. You know, I wrote the back of it, called “It’ll Be Me,” which Sam thought was gonna be the A-side, but friends and neighbors had another idea. But anyway, I got paid for all the mechanicals. Money like I’d never seen!

I hear a lot of that in these interviews, people talking about riding the B-side.

Get a free ride. You remember that record “Patches” [a #1 single for Dickey Lee]?

Yeah. I know you produced that.

I had the backside of that too. So I got a free ride on that one.

“Patches” was a Barry Mann song, wasn’t it?

I think so.

I was listening to that the other day.

It was a good record; it really was a good record. Had about three splices in it.

Had a lot of key changes in it.

Yeah, it had all that. And that’s the reason it had all them splices ’cause I had a band there that never made a record, and a vocal group that I’d just put together. And they would hit some clunkers so I had to cut round them. But it turned out good.

Digital has sure made that kind of stuff easier.

No, it had *nine* splices in it. It was made up of three different takes. I used to do that. I was good at that — with the scissors.

That was your big hit in Beaumont, Texas, wasn’t it?

Yeah.

Allen Reynolds tells this terrific story of when he first saw you in Memphis riding up on your motorcycle. He makes you sound quite heroic, all in black leather.

It wouldn’t have been all black leather; I never had anything in black leather.

Yeah, I got into motorcycles. This guy that worked for Elvis got canned and Elvis had given him this little Harley. It was cute. And Elvis had kicked him out so it was for sale for a couple of hundred bucks, and in really great shape. So I bought it. Wouldn’t go but about 50 miles an hour. Pretty soon I’m wanting to go faster! Actually, me and Jerry Lee Lewis and Roy Orbison went over to the motorcycle place one day and all of us bought a motorcycle. Roy bought that big Harley, and that’s probably the one his wife got killed on. And Jerry Lee got one, and I got this K model — it was a drag thing, you know; it was fast and powerful. I had that for a while, but then I got tired of it. I’d leave it out behind Sun Records and I wouldn’t ride it for a couple of months and it’d freeze up.

How busy were you at Sun in those days? Were you putting in long hours?

Oh, yeah. I loved it! I was in hog heaven. See, I'd been wanting to get into recording and all that and I'd built a little studio in this guy's garage — my partner, Slim Wallace. We were gonna start a record label, but we never got [the studio] to the point where you could really cut a record in it. So we worked it up there and went down to this radio station to record Billy Lee Riley. Then I needed to have it mastered so I took it to Sam [Phillips], who was still doing that. Got the acetate master so we could press a record. We were gonna put it on Fernwood [Clement's and Wallace's label]. Well, Sam heard it and liked it; said, "That's the first rock 'n' roll anybody's brought me around here." He asked me what I was doing. I said, "Well, I've been going to college. Right now I'm working out at a building supply place. I don't like it very much." He said, "Maybe you oughta come and work for me." I said, "Maybe I should."

Two weeks later, June 15th, I was there.

Things happened fast in those days, didn't they?

Well, like "Crazy Arms": we cut that on Thursday, Sam was in Nashville. He comes in the studio on Monday; we go back into the control room, I put the tape on and I hit Play, and before it ever got to the singing — just from the way the piano sounded on the very front of it — he reached over and stopped the machine, said, "Now, I can *sell* that!" That was in October, 1956.

Then he played the rest of it, made an acetate right there in the control room, took it to Dewey Phillips [a Memphis DJ who championed local artists] that night. But in the meantime — by then he'd quit doing his own mastering; he had a better place in Chicago — we shot that thing off to Chicago, [got it] back the next day or something. We had records in the store by Thursday.

If we'd *really* been in a hurry we could have had it in the store by Tuesday!

Amazing. Now it's all so committee-ridden and complicated.

Yeah. Freedom is what the music business needs,

Spontaneity.

Yeah, right. That's the kind of stuff I really picked up on from Sam. That spontaneity thing. He liked to work with musicians that weren't so polished, that were still learning. 'Cause they're experimenting and you get the benefit of that experimentation. Never know what might happen. You know, a lot of them great licks are accidents in the first place. That was the whole deal there, see. Sam, his sermon was, "Be different! Bring me something different." We weren't trying to compete with Nashville; we wanted something different. The stranger the better, man.

So he gave me license. Hey, and suddenly I'm working there and I've got all this equipment to play with. Echo! We didn't have no echo at that other little garage studio yet. That's the first thing I wanted Sam to show me: "How do you get that echo?"

Was it your buddy Don Robertson who influenced Floyd Cramer?

He invented that Cramer-style piano playing. He lived in California and he was a good friend of Chet; Chet had done an album with him, or did it later. Don had written a song, "Please Help Me I'm Falling," and he made a demo of it with him playing the piano that way. Sent it to Chet; Chet played it for Hank Locklin. They were booking a session and rather than get Don in to play it, he got Floyd to learn it. You know, he was imitating a steel guitar was what he was

doing. And [Floyd] did it just like Don had done it, and then he had a career based on that. Which really wasn't fair to Don but Chet had good intentions.

But I bet if he'd've done that over he'd've probably let ol' Don come in and play it. He's a great songwriter, and a great piano player.

Were you friendly with Sam Phillips at the end?

I was. Absolutely. Years ago, I decided I didn't want to lose contact with Sam; I needed him in my life, you know. He had that strange perspective, 'cause he was always full of shit but he was always *profound*.

Always made me think of a wizard when I'd see those TV images of him.

Oh yeah. So we stayed very close.

As obviously you did with Cash.

Oh yeah. Well, see, he liked my Dobro playing and I've done a bunch of sessions with him in the last couple of years. Mostly out at his place. I've got some Dobro parts I've gotta fix now, stuff he left me. I've got my Dobro on it but I was always planning on redoing them. It's okay but I can do it better. Well, I'll get around to that. Johnny Cash ain't in no hurry 'bout that no more, I don't guess.

Sounds like you don't let things go. You hang on to all this stuff from your past, talking about redoing everything. There aren't enough hours in the day.

[Chuckling] I know it.

Are you one of these guys who doesn't sleep much?

No, I sleep good, 'cept sometimes I get my sleep schedule off when I take a nap in the afternoon then I can't go back to sleep till two o'clock or something. I got some rather mild little sleeping aids, prescribed, which I only take when I need to. But no, I sleep good; I have a lot of time on my hands, really. It's just the last couple of weeks I've been doing interviews, a lot of stuff with the Johnny Cash thing.

And then Sheb Wooley died and I had to go out and make a speech at his funeral. I've been to that same church three times since June died in May.

It's been a sad couple of years, really. I mean, June, Waylon, Harlan Howard, Chet Atkins...

Me and Chet always stayed close. He'd drop by here, you know, on his way home.

Stupid question, maybe, but how does this make you *feel*, in terms of your own mortality? All these people that so important to you...

I used to have these 30-year plans and stuff. I ain't making no 30-year plans right now. I'm just...not thinking 'bout it all that much, you know.

Do you ponder an afterlife?

Oh, I think I'm gonna go to Heaven. I believe in Heaven; I believe in God. I say my prayers. Reason I do is 'cause to not pray is not fair to others, I always say. "Hey, you fool, if you don't wanna pray for yourself, pray for *me*! I can use all the praying I can get."

I prayed a lot for Johnny Cash. A lot of people prayed a lot for him. He rocked the world,
man.

* * * * *

Clement's tribute poem to Johnny Cash, read at his funeral:

My Friend, The Famous Person

By Jack H. Clement

My friend, the famous person
Is a barrel full of fun
A rather shy guy
A very nice guy
In spite of all he's done

He's been around
This friend of mine
Ten times ten
And back again

Down the river
'Round the world
And up the creek times ten
But always springing forth and back again

For springing back
Brings special laughter
And toughens up the chinny-chin
And lets the player fall down harder
Just to get to bat again

To really know a fellow person
Takes a while, you know
It's seldom easy
But easily worth it
Just to find a kindred soul

A kindred soul will pass the test
Or flunk it just for spite
Just to enjoy being human
So let him do it
It's his right

Scold him quickly if he needs it
And never be a yesing man

Tell him no
When no's the answer
Or a lie he'll love and understand

A kindred soul comes back around
And never really leaves
Though some time will pass
While he seems like an ass
He'll show up in one of your dreams

Just to enjoy being human
So let him do it
It's his right

My friend, the famous person
Is a pal you might know too
For he has a lot of friends
And that's what makes him true

And true finds truth to realize
That there's more to the truth
Than the absence of lies

It takes a good man to take success
And not misplace his soul
Though stumbling through the facts of life
And too much rock and roll

He's a hero drifting huckward
Ever rising from the south
Ever learning
Ever earning
My attention span

He gives a lot, this friend of mine
He lives a lot, this friend of mine
And loves from way within
And defeats the lust for anger
Whether he needs it or not
Just to enjoy being a human

But never guilt should my friend feel
That's neither good nor dignified
It's negative
Wrong
And an all-round bad deal

For fame's a law
And love's a duty
And that could put one on the fence
But laughter loose and silly-hearted
Makes it all make sense

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