



A conversation with Cowboy Jack Clement

BY PETER COOPER

IT HASN'T ALL WORKED out for Cowboy Jack Clement. Back in the 1970s, he lost a healthy life's savings producing an obscure horror movie called *Dear Dead Delilah*. He helped launch the career of mondo-successful country artist Don Williams but failed to sign Williams to his JMI Records label, and the lack of Williams-spurred profits may have kept him from making a serious run at populating a space colony.

Otherwise, things have gone pretty well. Remarkably, actually. In the 1950s, Clement was an integral part of the Sun Records scene that introduced rock 'n' roll to an unsuspecting American populace. As Sam Phillips' engineer/producer/songwriter/right-hand man, Clement was the first guy to record Jerry Lee

Lewis, and he was there at Sun to work with Johnny Cash, Charley Pride, Roy Orbison and other greats.

The Sun years would, on their own, serve as a considerable legacy. But after leaving Phillips in 1959, Clement worked briefly in Nashville with Chet Atkins before heading to Beaumont, Texas, and cutting a million-seller with Dickey Lee.

After that, it was back to Nashville, where he became: the discoverer and producer of Charley Pride; the mastermind behind as early (some say the first) concept album, Bobby Bare's Bird Named Yesterday; the early champion of Williams; a creative mentor to producer Allen Reynolds (Crystal Gayle, Garth Brooks, etc.); early-career producer of the legendary singer-songwriter Townes Van Zandt; producer of fine albums by Johnny Cash and John Hartford, and of Waylon Jennings' landmark Dreaming My Dreams, which Jennings considered his personal highwater mark; owner of a recording studio in which memorable works by Alison Krauss, Nanci Griffith, Iris Dement and others were captured; and the answer to a thousand intriguing trivia questions, small and large. (Who wrote "Just Someone I Used To Know"? Who filmed comedy skits involving Johnny Cash that would put "Saturday Night Live" shame if they were ever

released. Who is the self-proclaimed "Polka King of Nashville"? Who is the only Nashvillian to have produced songs for U2?)

Throughout all of the odd, sometimes disjointed segments of his career, Clement has been known for good humor, high intelligence and a fevered aversion to stepping in line. He's been called a weirdo and a fraud, though (as Peter Guralnick noted more than a quarter-century ago in his glorious hook, *Lost Highway*) Clement's resume of culture-tweaking success should preclude the latter notion.

He spends most of his time at his famed home/recording studio on Nashville's Belmont Avenue, entertaining a steady stream of visitors and accomplices with more songs, more stories and more laughs.

The place is its own kind of heaven. Clement may turn up the stereo and play country songs he produced for Louis Armstrong, Shawn Camp may drop by to chat, Eddy Arnold may stop by to work on an upcoming album, or Eugene the cat may jump on Cowboy's desk and show off his high-fiving ability.

Those who have heard Clement sing - his crooning voice conveying equal amounts whimsy and dusky

sadness - sometimes refer to him as one of Nashville's great unknown recording artists. His long out-of-print *All I Want to Do In Life*, released in 1978, has been his only commercially released solo album. Now 73, he'll seek to remove the "unknown" part of that equation with the September 14 release of *Guess Things Happen That Way* (yes, he wrote that classic Johnny Cash song) on Dualtone Records.

NO DEPRESSION: Back in 1958, Sun Records sent out a press release that announced "the groundwork for Jack's predicted fame and fortune has been methodically laid." How intent were you at that point on being a recording artist?

JACK CLEMENT: Well, at that point I wasn't all that intent on it. I was intent on it in 1952 and '53, but after awhile I decided I didn't really want to do that. It was too much of 'a commitment. Besides that, I noticed that every time I'd go play somewhere I'd always want to have a few cocktails, and I could see where that would lead me. I might have been a drunk! Instead of something better, for instance.

ND: Did your interest in different music hurt you

as far as developing in a particular direction

JC: I think so. I wanted to have fun and play a lot of different stuff. I'd get tired of bluegrass and want to play Hawaiian music for awhile. And I enjoyed playing for dances. I wasn't a dancer back at that point, but I knew what got people on the floor. I'd like to do that again, have a dance band. Not just do dance numbers all the time, but throw in a samba, do a tango. "Hernando's Hideaway" that's a good one. (Here, Cowboy croons, "I know a dark secluded place/A place where no one knows your face.")

ND: Did you immediately latch onto rock 'n roll when you heard it

JC: First time I heard Elvis, I loved it. It was the morning after Dewey Phillips had first played it. Next morning, Sleepy Eyed John came on at 9 a.m. and he came on with "Blue Moon [Of Kentucky]". He played that all day, that and "That's All Right, Mama". By the end of the day, Elvis was a big star in Memphis.

ND: Did that feel like something monumental was going on?

JC: I knew I liked it, and I knew everybody I saw that day liked it and they were all talking about it. When I first heard it, it was kind of like, "Why didn't I do that?" The sound wasn't all that strange to me. I had done similar things onstage, with slapping bass and that kind of stuff. But not on the radio, not on records. To me it was like a fart without any aroma. [With that, Jack smiles and pushes a button on one of his many desktop trinkets. This one sounds off, "Fart detected! Fart detected! Evacuate!"]

ND: When you brought that first record to Sam Phillips, were you seeking to begin a working relationship?

JC: No, I hired him to master a record for me, one that I'd recorded on Billy Lee Riley. He had the lathe and the reputation as the guy in town that did that. When I went to pick the tape up, he told me he liked that record and wanted to know if I'd be interested in having it on Sun and he'd pay us a penny a record. Then he asked me what I was doing. I said I'd been going to Memphis State but now I was working at a building supply place. I said "'Course, I don't like it very much." He said, "Well, maybe you ought to come to work for me." I

said "Maybe I should." Two weeks later, I did. So when I went to work with Sam, I brought him a finished product. I never considered myself an engineer, per se. I was one of the few early musician types that were running a board. To me it was like a musical instrument. I was an operator, not an engineer.

Sam's whole thing was "Do something different!" as long as it didn't cost him too much money. He knew he couldn't compete with Nashville in a standard musical way. It was a very free atmosphere. I was in hog heaven. All of a sudden, I had echo. I wasn't trying to get reality, you know" I was trying to make it sound better than reality. A lot of times it did.

(Shawn Camp, a friend and member of Clements' band, sits down and poses a question.)

SHAWN CAMP: Jack, you told me one time about selling a bunch of Sun records one time. What did you say happened with that?

JC: See, we had these returns at Sun. You ship a lot of records, you get a lot of returns. And the returns would usually come into the studio, and they'd stack 'em out there. Sometimes there'd be so

many records out in the studio that it'd change the sound of the place. When we'd move 'em out, it would sound more "live" in there, because those records would absorb sound. Anyway, it was starting to get full one time and I said to Sam, "Why don't we take 'em out to the plant and sell 'em by the pound, for scrap. They could grind 'em tip and make new records out of 'em." Sam said "OK." Aw, we ground up millions of 'em. I'm sure there was a bunch of Elvis in there. It was a lot of ' records. Sold 'em by the pound. We didn't get very much for them. That's probably the reason a lot of them records are in short supply.

ND: When you left that situation at Sun and came to Nashville, how did the town feel?

JC: It seemed square.

ND: Did you regret leaving Sun?

JC: Not really. I left Sun in February of '59, and I was ready to go. I could have stayed. Sam fired me and Bill Justis one night when he got drunk. He wrote us letters. I'm sure he regretted it the next day. He even offered to set me tip a distributor label. But Cash was gone, Jerry Lee wasn't selling,

nothing much was happening. I was thinking I could get out of town and do something else. Go to Nashville.

ND: That didn't last too long, and you went to Beaumont soon after. Why go to Texas?

JC: I wanted to go someplace where I could have fun and cut local records. They had a sound going down there, regional kind of stuff. The variations of style, that was what made country music. That appealed to me more than trying to follow trends. Well, within six months after I got there we cut a million-seller, "Patches", with Dickey Lee.

ND: Why leave Beaumont, then?

JC: I was getting tired of it and started wanting to go to Nashville or something. The last year I was down there, I mostly wrote songs, so when I came to Nashville I had 30 or so good ones. When I moved here, I started getting them cut pretty quick. That was good, because I didn't have a lot of money; I think I hit town with \$135 in the bank, but I never ran out.

ND: Somewhere in there, I'd heard you were going to

write a hook.

JC: Yeah, but I was taking a bath one night and Bobby Bare called me. At that point, I'd decided to get out of the music business and write a book. So every day I'd go into my office, smoke cigarettes and write. Just plain cigarettes, though. Anyway, I'd decided to sell my publishing company to Bill Hall, for \$75,000. He had the check cut and everything. That's when I was taking that bath, and Bobby Bare called and told me that a song I'd written called "Miller's Cave" was going to be his next single. Well, I thought that was such a neat thing and I told Bill I'd like to get out of the sale.

ND: Bare is an important guy. Maybe more than he gets credit for sometimes.

JC: People respected him. Good songs. good voice. And he was a great ballad singer. I think people forget that.

ND: You worked with him on the Bird Named Yesterday album. [Cowboy conceived of the 1967 album, produced it, and wrote most of the songs.] Was Bird Named Yesterday the first country concept album?

JC: It was very early, but I don't know if it was the first. "The Air Conditioner Song" from that album, that's one of my favorites that I've written, 'cause it's true. It was me when I was a kid. My mother used to drag me to Newport, Arkansas, several times a year to visit my grandparents. I'd like it once I got there. You could walk to the movie theaters, watch the trains coming in, and you had the levee to play on and slide down on cardboard. I got to experience that small town, Tom Sawyer life, so that was good. Well, I must have been eight or nine, and "You Are My Sunshine" was a big hit at that time. This must have been about 1939, something like that. I'd be laying in my little bed with the window open, and out the window I could hear girls singing "You Are My Sunshine". They sang other things, but they sang that several times a night. They sang it so pretty, and I envisioned them as being beautiful. But I never saw them. That's what "The Air Conditioning Song" is about. It's great to be in a sealed place and not have to sweat, but you miss something when you don't have those windows open. I mean, you can miss something good.

ND: How long was it after you got back to Nashville that you began propping up new artists?

JC: I got here in '65, and it was that year when I cut Charley Pride's first record. I met him through this guy Jack Johnson. One night we were at a place called the Professional Club. The building's gone now, but it was a real hangout for songwriters. Tom T. Hall would be there, and Kristofferson. I took Kristofferson there the first night he came to town, and he got so caught up in it that he resigned his Army commission and moved here to be a music bum. But the Professional Club was a great place. I'd be there, go home to write a song about 8 o'clock in the evening, drive back down there and sing it to the boys, you know? We're in there one night and having a few cocktails, and Jack keeps telling me about Charley Pride. He talked me into going across the street to his office and listen to it. So we went over there, and listened, and it sounded pretty good. I could tell the guy could sing and that he was for real, and that he was really country. So we went back over there and had a few more cocktails and I said, "Get him in here, I'll cut a song on him." Five or six days later, Charley came back from seeing his father in Mississippi, and I had a session set up at RCA Studio B and we went in and did it. I paid for it, and ... well, then I had the only Charley Pride

record in town. I had this office with these big speakers, and I'd get people in there and play Charley's record. Loud, man. Like, really loud. I'd play that record and then I'd show 'em his picture. That was fun.

ND: Was he nervous going into those first sessions?

JC: He was born nervous. But somehow nervousness made him go. and he liked to have an audience in the control room. That first session, word had got out that Cowboy was going to produce a black guy. So there were a bunch of people in the control room, including Connie B. Gay, who later told Chet about Charley and helped get him a record deal. So I found out then that Charley liked having an audience. After that, his sessions were more open than normally limy sessions would be.

ND: That's one of your rules of recording, as posted in Johnny Cash's cabin out in Hendersonville, "Don't bring or invite anyone."..

JC: Well, rules were made to be broken.

ND: Plenty of people showed up to watch the *Dreaming My Dreams* sessions that you produced on

Waylon Jennings. I've heard it could be a real party in there, and that you and Waylon didn't always get along famously during the recording.

JC: 'There was one time I remember that Jessi [Colter] was there, and by then I'm married to her sister, and some other people were in the control room, and I wanted them out. I was being sort of dramatic. Waylon's looking through the glass, seeing me moving around, and he thinks I'm in there having a party or something. That's when I got to thinking more and more about not having a control room window. Something about you can see through a wall, but you can't hear: Fakes people out. Waylon was on a lot of cocaine during that time. That had a lot to do with it. But we didn't argue all the time. We had some great times. We had some arguments about he thought he was spending too much money on a piano player, Charles Cochran. He thought he was paying too much for a piano player who didn't play all that much. Fact is, Charles was doing some very creative laving out on some things. It worked out though. *Dreaming My Dreams* is one of the albums I'm most proud of. Maybe the one I'm proudest of, I don't know.

ND: You sometimes set yourself up almost as a foil

to the artist.

JC: You got to remember, most singers are insecure. We all know that, right? And a lot of 'em are not too bright. Singers are a pain in the ass if you want to know the truth about it. Most of 'em. Well, all of 'em. I mean. I had my ideas about things, songs and phrasing and so on. and I was right a lot of the time. When I first started working with Charley I had (a lot) to say about what was going to be the songs. 'Course we'd argue, but I could win out. And after we'd had about three big ones in a row. He said "Why do you have to always be right" And he was serious.

ND: When the Pride stuff started hitting, were you thinking it was empire-building time? Did you want to parlay that into something huge?

JC: I was always spending none money than I took in. So, sure. I was always empire-building. I lust wanted to build studios and make movies and start record labels. You know, little stuff.

ND: By that time you were almost a polarizing figure in Nashville. People either believed fully in you or thought you were a fraud or a crazy guy.

JC: I was always aware that certain people thought I was loony. Not loony, but ...yeah, wild and woolly and not respectful of the powers that be

ND: You were quoted when your first record came out as saying it was going to be the next hit thing, that it was going to revolutionize country music. Did you really believe that?

JC: I don't know if I believed after I finished the record. I believed it along the way to that, though.

ND: What happened?

JC: First it took me too long. It took two and a half years to do it. I was going around saying, "Someone can cut a hit record in three minutes. Therefore I can cut a hit album in 30." Then it took me more than two years.