

DON ROBERTSON: BENDING THE IVORIES

by Larry Wayne Clark, Brainchild Music

He has met and mingled with giants of our time and culture—including Carl Sandburg, Walt Disney, Johnny Mercer, Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, Chet Atkins, and many more—and you’ve probably never heard of him. But, true to the essence of the songwriter’s unique relationship with his society, you’ve undoubtedly heard him . . . his words, his music. And in the case of Don Robertson, you’ve heard his deft, slip-note piano stylings. Whether played by him, his contemporaries or his successors, they’ve become a part of the keyboardist’s basic lexicon, a country-flavored approach often referred to as “Cramer style,” but more on that later.

If you’re old enough to remember the effervescent 1956 hit “The Happy Whistler,” then you’ve even heard his whistling.

Don’t look here for sharecroppers’ cabins, barefoot treks to one-room schoolhouses or family gatherings around the battery-powered Philco to glean the nourishment of the Grand Ole Opry through the Saturday night static. This isn’t that kind of story. Donald Irwin Robertson was born in 1922 in Beijing, China. His father was a doctor and a medical scientist, his mother a nurse as well as an amateur writer and musician. Showing an early aptitude for piano and a passion for songs (he began making them up as a boy), Don was, for much of his life, torn between the respectability of a “serious” life as a doctor or lawyer (which he felt was expected of him), and the siren lure of music (which he loved).

Back in the States, now living in Chicago, he attended the University of Chicago as a pre-med student. He did not, to his father’s chagrin, attain a degree. He had begun playing piano with local dance bands at the age of 14, and when an opportunity arose to go on the road with popular trio The Dinning Sisters, he seized it. Apparently his interest was more than just professional; lead singer Lou Dinning became the first Mrs. Don Robertson. The couple began calling Los Angeles home in the mid-’40s. Don became a rehearsal pianist with Capitol Records during the glory days of that company. And he began writing songs in earnest.

Julian and Jean Aberbach’s Hill and Range Songs published his earliest efforts, including the country-pop standard “I Really Don’t Want To Know,” memorably recorded by Eddy Arnold in 1954 (and later by Elvis), and appearing in the 2004 independent film A Love Song For Bobby Long, where it was sung on-camera by none other than John Travolta. The song bears many of what would become Robertson trademarks: a simple yet elegant melody married to equally unassuming yet emotionally charged words that form a near-perfect, easily memorable, whole.

In 1959 Don’s demo of a song called “Please Help Me, I’m Falling” found its way to Chet Atkins, who was impressed by both the song and the demo itself which featured Don’s vocal and piano. The piano intro and accompaniment—riddled with those ear-candy slip-note phrasings that Don had been experimenting with—captivated him particularly . . . so much so that when the song became an Atkins-produced 1960 hit for Hank Locklin, the piano parts were replicated all but verbatim by Floyd Cramer. Don Robertson doesn’t like to go into detail about this nowadays; he’s a gentleman who doesn’t like to ruffle feathers and besides, most of the key players in the drama are dead. But there are many in the industry—“Cowboy” Jack Clement, Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires and Elvis, to name a few—who will proclaim flatly that Don Robertson, with no offense whatsoever intended to the great Mr. Cramer, is the true originator of

that groundbreaking piano style. In 1994 "Please Help Me, I'm Falling" was ranked #2 All-time Country Hit by Billboard magazine.

He has had 14 songs recorded by Elvis, mostly ballads and mid-tempo best exemplified by the haunting "Anything That's Part Of You," sung to aching perfection in 1962. In 2003 Bear Family Records released a 25-song collection entitled Don Robertson: And Then I Wrote... Songs for Elvis, which provides valuable insight into Don's piano finesse as well as letting us hear his evocative, somewhat chameleonic vocals.

In 1964 he and Hal Blair scored a #1 Pop hit with the spoken-word cowboy ballad "Ringo," rendered in the unforgettable rumbling bass of actor Lorne Greene, patriarch of TV's Bonanza.

Other hits include "I Don't Hurt Anymore," co-written with Jack Rollins (of "Frosty The Snowman" fame), recorded by both Hank Snow (as "It Don't Hurt Anymore") and Dinah Washington in 1954; "Ninety Miles An Hour (Down A Dead End Street)," co-written with Blair and recorded by Hank Snow in 1963 and later covered by Bob Dylan. "Does My Ring Hurt Your Finger," co-written with Jack Clement and John Crutchfield and recorded by Charley Pride in 1967, was a Grammy nominee that year.

A brief sampling of other artists recording Don Robertson songs might include Al Martino, Andy Williams, the Wilburn Brothers, the Everly Brothers, Anne Murray, Vic Damone, Brook Benton, Bill Anderson, Gladys Knight, Frankie Laine, Willie Nelson, Ronnie Milsap, Billy Swan, Patti Page, Dean Martin, Bonnie Guitar, 101 Strings, Jim Nabors, Ray Price, Duane Eddy and Danish pianist Bent Fabric. And many more.

He claims that his catalog is now more active than ever, not least of all the Elvis recordings. All Shook Up, a Broadway show incorporating 25 Elvis songs into its plotline, features a "stunning" performance of "There's Always Me" by Sharon Wilkins that had the song's author in tears. He has received two BMI performance awards and 18 ASCAP performance awards, and in 1967 his name was added to the "Walkway of Stars" at Nashville's Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, where some of his work is displayed. He was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1972. And—a unique honor indeed—"Pianjo," a Robertson instrumental, provides the opening tune of the Country Bear Jamboree at Disney parks around the world, as played by Gomer the computerized ragtime bear.

An arranger-conductor, Don Robertson plays piano, organ, trumpet, trombone and tenor horn—and let's not forget that whistling! Now in his 80s, he is humble and gentle-spoken, retaining the details of his impressive life and career in sharp relief. One gets the impression that he's well aware of how fortunate he's been, and that a sense of wonder still prevails. Due to a stroke some four years ago his chops aren't what they were, but he's working hard to rehabilitate himself. He warns me, in advance of our phone talk, that his concentration and energy can be fragile and that he may want to stop after 30 minutes or so, perhaps picking up the thread another day. Not so. After 90 minutes of lucid and fascinating conversation, I'm the one who finally pulls the plug. Don's wife, Irene, sits near him throughout, sometimes providing names and dates when he hesitates. I find this rather touching.

I begin by complimenting him on his marvelous website, www.donrobertson.com.

I was scouring your website today. That's a great site!

Thank you. Yeah, a friend of my son's does that for a living so she did it for us. Ann Zumwinkle is her name.

How many children do you have?

Two sons. And an increasingly large number of grandchildren.

Well, that's a good thing.

Yeah, it is.

You were born in 1922!

That's right. That's what it says on the certificate anyway [chuckles].

It's amazing. You sound like a much younger man. Your voice is very youthful.

Glad to hear it.

Do you still sing?

Yeah, I do. But I haven't done any recording sessions for a few years.

How long did your career as Gomer the bear last?

Well, let's see . . . I'll have to check when I did that [confers briefly with Irene].

I was gonna say 1971, I think it was. Actually a friend of mine who lived out here—he's passed away, a neighbor of ours—he had heard my recording of a piece called "Pianjo." Supposed to be a combination of piano and banjo. It was an instrumental I had put out on Monument Records, and Jack Speirs, who was a writer and producer at Disney Studios, heard it and liked it. And at that time Walt Disney was putting together this Country Bear Jamboree show for Disneyland out here and in the various parks around the world. So anyway, Jack played him my recording of "Pianjo" and Walt liked it.

So rather than try to get that master they just asked me if I'd come down and record it again at the Disney Studios, which I did.

How did the song come to have that name? Were you somehow incorporating a banjo approach on the piano?

Yeah, somewhat. Although this was not really the best example, 'cause I've done other pieces where I've adapted Earl Scruggs things to the piano. This didn't really have a lot of that but, I don't know, it seemed to be enough to call it "Pianjo." Not a very good title.

So you're a bluegrass fan?

Yeah, among other things. Actually I'm a very enthusiastic bluegrass fan. Jack Clement got me intersted in a lot of stuff and I got to hear a lot of his bluegrass buddies play in his office.

I saw a picture of you with the Kentucky Colonels on your website.

Yeah, that was around the same time.

Piano, in some views, is not really conducive to bluegrass, though I have heard it incorporated successfully at times. It's interesting though that bluegrass is among your bouquet of musical interests. You seem to come from a very different place.

Yeah it's pretty rare to see a piano as part of a bluegrass group.

Bruce Hornsby can do it.

Can he? Excellent player, I really like his work.

He has a way of omitting the third that blends with banjos and mandolins and seems to belong.

This is such a great time in the history of the music business for keyboard players because of all the synthesizers and stuff that you can do on a keyboard.

Yeah—that's good and bad.

Well it is, yeah, but at least you've got all those sounds at your beck and call.

In the hands of a masterful musician you get masterful results. But it also means that anybody who can play in C reasonably well can play anywhere, with transposition.

Well that's true.

But then again it worked for Irving Berlin and he had to do it mechanically.

Yeah [laughs]. He came out pretty well!

Well so have you! Your biography is just awe-inspiring when I see all the different bases you've touched. You were at Capitol Records in the early days.

Uh-huh.

Was Johnny Mercer involved at that time?

He was. Johnny Mercer and Glenn Wallichs, who owned a big music store. He and Johnny Mercer and Buddy DeSylva, the songwriter.

DeSylva, Brown and Henderson.

That's right. Exactly right.

Anyway, I think they each pitched in ten thousand bucks and started Capitol Records. And when I first touched base with Capitol they had a little office upstairs in a really tiny space just below Sunset Boulevard, on Vine Street. Then later on as things moved along—'cause Johnny Mercer was such a master—

Underrated musician too.

I think so because his songwriting is so unbelievable. He was not a schooled musician in the sense of being a professional player, but he was certainly an excellent and appealing singer, I thought. Very appealing style—like "Blues In The Night" which he did just beautifully. I don't think anybody can match his performances on some of those things. I don't know as far as musicianship, beyond his singing. I never saw him touch the keyboard.

Apparently he couldn't really play but he could come up with melodies. You know, he wrote the melody for "Dream" and for "I Wanna Be Around," which is a great jazz standard, I think. "G.I. Jive," "Strip Polka." His own melodies.

That's news to me.

I think he was more comfortable when they were clever.

Yeah, uptempo things.

So did you get to know [Capitol staffers] Paul Weston and Jo Stafford?

I did. Paul Weston was more or less the head of the music department when I first got involved with Capitol.

Great arranger.

Oh, terrific arranger! Good musician. I was aware of Jo Stafford of course [’40s singing star who worked with, and eventually married, Weston] but I never really got to know her particularly well.

Did you get to know “Frankie”?

Frankie Laine?

No, Frank Sinatra. I’m being a smartass.

Oh, Frank Sinatra. Well, I was a rehearsal pianist there for about four years and he would come in occasionally and I would accompany him, although he had a very, very good accompanist.

Bill Miller.

Yeah, exactly right. But if he wasn’t around at the time they would ask me to play, so I did accompany Sinatra a couple of times.

It’s amazing. You’re walking with giants here.

That’s true, and I was not that aware of it at the time and it’s a good thing. I would have fallen to pieces! Yeah, I touched . . . I breathed the same air as some pretty prominent people.

Was Sinatra impressive in person? Did the genius come through that emerged on tape?

Well, he was a kind of dese-and-dose type of guy who was also self-educated, and he kinda climbed out of that just by himself, you know. He exhibited high intelligence. And he was . . . I dunno, I liked him. And he was nice to me so that makes me like people [chuckles].

Just a little aside . . . one of the producers at Capitol took me over to Sinatra’s apartment in Westwood sometime in the early ’50s, and when we walked in he was sitting at his dining room table working on his taxes. He had all the forms around him and everything, and he complained about the fact that he felt like he’d been ripped off. He was not satisfied with the way whoever it was did his taxes and he was going to do ’em himself. Interesting guy.

Frank Sinatra doing his own taxes. Very interesting picture!

Yeah. Interesting guy.

Was that voice special when it was in the room with you? Some people record more magnificently than they sound across the table.

That’s true, yeah. Well, I don’t recall there being any difference when he was in the room. It wasn’t something that just blew me away. I knew what his style was and that was *him*. It seemed natural.

Had you started writing songs by then?

I didn't really start writing songs until I'd been at Capitol a couple of years. I started at Capitol, I think, in '51 and 1952 was when my first efforts at songwriting [occurred], when I met Hal Blair, who was my partner later on a lot of songs.

And within a short time you had a big one with "I Really Don't Want To Know."

Yes, that's true. And that wasn't with Hal. I sort of got in with a group of people and Howard Barnes, my lyric writer on "I Really Don't Want To Know," was part of a sort of local group of people who were active in Hollywood.

Now when you were writing a song like that did you see yourself as a country or country & western writer, or just a certain kind of ballad writer? How would a song like that be pitched?

Well, in this case I had come into contact with the Aberbach brothers, who had Hill and Range Songs—are you familiar with that?—'cause I had occasion to work on demonstration records for them. So I got to know them a little bit. And Hal and I had written a song for Eddy Arnold which kinda made a little bit of noise at the bottom of the country charts—it was called "Condemned Without Trial." And anyway, the Aberbachs were interested in getting more material for Eddy Arnold.

So they were the moving force, actually, here because the lyric to "I Really Don't Want To Know" had been written to a different melody, and had been recorded by several people just because the idea was intriguing, you know. But the Aberbachs were convinced that the melody was wrong and that it needed different music, so they asked me if I wanted to take a crack at it and they got the music writer of the original song to sign a release. And they gave me the lyric. It was done, I would say, with Eddy Arnold in mind.

Yeah, it was really fun to work on that song because the lyric was just so interesting.

But that must have been a difficult challenge with another melody in your face, or did you not hear the melody?

I asked them not to play me the other melody.

Did you eventually hear it?

Yeah, I eventually did.

What'd you think of it?

I was not too impressed [laughs]. And it was an entirely different tone. It was partly in a minor key I believe. I haven't listened to it for years and years and years, but I pretty much had a chance to approach the lyric fresh and that was a big advantage.

Are you comfortable with that challenge of sitting down with a totally composed lyric?

It's only happened to me a few times where the lyric just felt right to me without having to rewrite. Most of the time when people have given me lyrics I've ended up rewriting a good part of it. This was one of the few times where—aside from repeating a couple of phrases and some ifs, ands and buts—other than that it's just the way it had been written. It was like smorgasbord, being given something wonderful to work on, you know.

Did it take long to complete?

No, actually it didn't take a long time. I kinda walked around with that lyric in my head for a while before I started working on it, and then I took it into a little studio that I had in North Hollywood at that time, just a piano and a chair. I took it in and I worked on it, oh I'd say for a few hours, and I really felt that it was kinda patched together from other songs or something. It just didn't seem very original to me but anyway I ended up showing it to, first of all, my ex-wife who was singing all my demos at that time—

This was one of the Dinning Sisters?

Right, yeah. Lou Dinning. And she fell over, she thought it was absolutely great. So then we made a demo and took it down to the Aberbachs and they loved it, and it really had an easy road.

Of course you couldn't have had a better interpreter than Eddy Arnold.

No, that's right.

He was gigantic at that time, wasn't he?

He was, yes. He was very successful.

He was like a slightly countrified Bing Crosby.

Exactly. Yes.

You know, I guess I would have been ten years old when “Please Help Me, I’m Falling” came out, and that holds a place in my esteem as being one of those perfect country melodies that you sometimes hear. Hank Williams had a couple of them . . . “You Win Again” . . .

That's a nice compliment.

Songs you just couldn't change a note or a syllable of without doing damage. Belonging to a certain era as well, when people like Fred Rose and the Bryants, and so forth, were still working.

How did that one come about?

Actually I have a habit of writing down titles and stuff, as you probably do too—writing down ideas and titles—and I had written “Please Help Me, I’m Falling” down as a title. And I was going through my files with Hal Blair one time and he picked out a few things that he thought would really be interesting to work on. So that was one that he picked out and we put our heads together and finished it up. The melody just seemed to come rather easily, but we worked hard on it until we felt that the lyric was the way it should be.

And at that point, too, I had been experimenting with different sounds on the piano which really were the result of listening to country guitar players and fiddle players and singers that got a particular sound that I had never heard on the piano. Guitar players particularly. So I was fiddling around with the piano to see if I could approach that sound where they slide to a note from underneath—and of course you can't do it on the piano unless you've got a very large wrench! [laughs] I guess the closest instrument that really does it is Earl Scruggs changing his tuning—what was the name of that song? “Flint Hill Special”? [sings a bit imitating notes altered

by twisting a tuning peg] Remember that? Where he plays and he actually reaches up and changes the tuning on the string.

Guitar players do that, like on the intro to “Detroit City.”

Right.

And this is something you’d become intrigued with at that time?

Yeah, very much so. And that was right at the point where we were working on “Please Help Me, I’m Falling” so there were a lot of firsts in my experience of that song. Because my ex-wife had been doing all the vocals on the demos and at that point she and I were just about separated, so it wasn’t very conducive to making music together. Anyway I went down [to the studio] and I decided I’d try singing it myself. I had a wonderful little studio that I used to work in, Gold Star Recording Studios in Hollywood—

Oh that’s a famous studio . . . Phil Spector . . .

Yep. At that time it was just a couple of guys that had built a little studio and I had known them from making some demos down there. So anyway, when we got the song finished up I took it down to Gold Star and Stan Ross, who was a co-owner, was in the booth, and one of the studios had just a piano in it. So I sang and played it. And I had worked on the accompaniment as I was working on the song, which very often happens with me—the lyric and the melody and the accompaniment sort of evolve at the same time.

So I made that little piano-and-voice demo and I gave it to the Aberbachs at Hill and Range. They sent it to Chet Atkins. Chet liked it and he gave it to Jim Reeves. I talked to Jim later on and he said that he’d held the song for two or three weeks and then turned it down, and he was regretting it ’cause at that point it was up on the charts.

Anyway, Chet decided to show it to Hank Locklin, who was kind of down on his luck at that point—that’s my recollection. I think he had “Send Me The Pillow That You Dream On” and one other song, but at that point he wasn’t doing very well.

Yours was his career song, no two ways about it.

Well it did work out that way, didn’t it? Funny . . . this is for an Irish publication?

Yeah, a newsletter.

I don’t know if they think Hank Locklin’s an Irish tenor but it sounds that way to me!

He does, you’re quite right. I always liked the way he sounded. I don’t think Jim Reeves would have done the song as well, personally.

I never thought about how it would have turned out if Jim Reeves had done it.

He would have relaxed it too much, I think.

Yeah, that’s true. I think Hank Locklin was just the right artist for that song.

It had a yearning quality to it.

Yeah.

So do you think that came out of your personal situation at that time? Sounds like you were going through a bit of turmoil.

Probably.

Do you find that your emotions creep into your work in an autobiographical way at times?

Yeah, I think so. But I think also being songwriters, as we are, you don't really have to be experiencing a certain thing at that point—you can draw on past experience—although I think it helps.

It's method acting, to a degree.

Right!

And you know, listening to that song years ago, and listening to it since, I would never have imagined that that was the work of somebody who was born in China—

[laughs] Unlikely, isn't it?

The son of a scientist?

Uh-huh.

That's a very unlikely history for a country songwriter.

I know!

You said somewhere that you didn't completely reconcile yourself to the fact that you weren't going to go back to medical school until you were in your 50s.

That's true. Because my two brothers both were MDs and my mother was a nurse, so I was surrounded by medical people and it was kind of the thing to do in our family.

Were you the black sheep?

Very much so, yeah.

Were you made to feel that way, seriously?

You know, the only thing I felt that my father felt, he was *worried* for me. And actually he had every reason to be if I was gonna try to be a professional songwriter, or even in the music business. I mean the chances are so slim that you can understand where a parent would be concerned. It wasn't that he disapproved, he just was concerned. And he was willing to send me through medical school or law school or whatever I wanted to do.

I really didn't feel certain, I didn't feel settled in the music thing until a very long way into it.

By which time you had probably made a lot of money and met a lot of people, achieved a lot.

Not all that much money, actually. You know, I make more now than I did at that time—even on 40-year-old songs—'cause the royalty rates were so puny. It was a two-cent ceiling for years and years and years.

It's hard for people to realize how famous you could be in your field and still really not be paid commensurately compared to just about any other profession.

I know. But God, you can't buy being happy and contented in your work. There's just no price on that.

"The Happy Whistler"! Talk about a happy record! Isn't it a shame that you can't hear that kind of thing on the radio any more?

I know. It's almost non-existent these days, isn't it?

Instrumental songs being *whistled*. Yeah, you could hear these little happy two-minute songs, some of them a bit silly but many of them really charming—I think yours is extremely so— you just can't imagine that happening any more.

I know it.

There are so many gatekeepers now and so much politics . . .

Yeah, you're absolutely right. Getting past them is something.

So you spent your boyhood in China?

No, not really. I was only there till I was four years old or not quite four years old. We left China in, I guess 1926 or something like that, and spent some time in southern France and then in England, where my father had relatives.

And then we came to the United States and settled in Chicago.

Do you speak any other languages?

No.

Didn't have enough time to get steeped in any of them, I guess.

Actually my parents told me that they couldn't get any of us—I have two brothers—to speak Chinese after we left China. I don't know what that's about.

It's a helluva thing to learn, from all reports.

It's a complicated language, yeah.

So you spent many years in Chicago and then left with the Dinning Sisters, is that right?

I went on the road with them, yeah.

So how did the music bug get to you? Your mother played, I think?

Yeah, she was quite a good pianist and she'd sing a little bit, although mostly I remember her as a pianist. My father was a great connoisseur of classical music and he had a huge collection of classical recordings, and almost every evening he'd be playing them.

These would have been 78s?

Yes, I think some of them were long-playing 78s, you know, big ones. Great big 12-inch discs.

That could break if you looked at them!

Absolutely, yeah. There was a machine which he bought called a Capehart that actually would lift the disc up—kinda like some of the jukeboxes—turn it over and put it back down again. [note: Homer Capehart's Simplex changer was indeed sold to Wurlitzer in 1933 to be used in jukeboxes.]

So he had a nice little set-up. I heard a lot of good classical music.

And you were learning piano at this time?

I was learning piano and so I was studying classical music too. At one point I had some fantasies about becoming a concert pianist but I never got even to first base.

Well, if you have the knack to actually make up your own tunes and explore chords and sort of work away from the page, I think it's hard to discipline yourself to be a classical player.

Yeah, that's true. People either seem to train their ears or their eyes. I haven't encountered too many people that are really ace sight-readers and are great improvisers. There are a few.

I had trouble with sight-reading. It really just defeated me and what I would do is I would fake it, you know, for my piano teacher. Get her to play it for me first and then I'd play it by ear and look at the music and she thought I was reading it! I think when you . . . in my case I was frustrated not being able to read and I depended more and more on my ear, and then I learned to improvise.

I've heard that story from a lot of people who took music lessons—if they had a good ear they would just memorize. They would learn to reiterate something more quickly than they'd learn to sight-read. Sight-reading is very dry and difficult and if you have a quick ear it's much easier to depend on that.

I got myself into some frightening situations because of that, because people would assume that I could read and I would say yes to jobs that I should never have and try to fake my way through 'em. And sometimes I ran into some really tight squeezes [chuckles].

But I'm not sorry now, though I wish I could sit down and play a Mozart sonata—you know, just sit down, open the book and play it. It would be wonderful. But that was not my destiny.

Have you ever written concert pieces?

Yeah, I did. I studied orchestration and composition both in Chicago and, later on, out here in Hollywood. I studied with a man who taught quite a few of the people who did movie scores. His name was Tedesco. Mancini was a pupil of his. [note: he's referring to Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1895-1968]

But anyway, yes I did study orchestration and composition and in the course of that I wrote some orchestral pieces. And I've written some piano pieces that would be called classical, I guess, and some studies that I've never done anything with.

You're also a horn player, I believe?

Yeah [chuckles]. I was excluded from the high school band because they didn't use a keyboard and so I learned trombone and trumpet, and I got to be in the marching band.

Who were the people that you listened to, be they singers or piano players, that sort of established your direction, led you away from the classics wanting to do something a little funkier, a little more contemporary. Who were you listening to?

Well, I was a jazz enthusiast and Art Tatum was one of my idols.

Yeah, the god . . . “God’s in the room.”

Yeah right. Nat Cole. I think he’s very underrated as a pianist. His touch was just exquisite. I used to learn his piano solos, like on those Nat Cole Trio recordings? I’d learn the piano part so I could play it note for note.

You know, I’m convinced that if you listen to people like Nat Cole and Teddy Wilson—

Teddy Wilson, right, he was one.

—Players of that ilk, you can hear a little of that slip-note thing.

Oh really, I never thought about that.

In a different way, just a little of that style that later became identified with Nashville. I mean, it wasn’t focused on in the same way but I’ve listened to, like, old Inkspots recordings where you hear that tinkling piano—I don’t know who would be playing it—and every now and again somebody will do a kind of ornament that, to me, is kind of Nashville-like. Kind of Cramer-like, or Robertson-like, if you will.

[chuckles] Well, you know this is an interesting thing: you know the blues things where there are grace notes or slurs? They’re half-tone slurs. Like if you were in the key of C you’d go from Eflat to E? Just slide off onto that. There’s a lot of that in blues playing and in jazz playing.

But the unique thing about the country style—and that’s what I was curious about—they were *whole-tone* trills and turns and grace notes. Like from D to E instead of Eflat to E.

And of course you’re playing the G above it.

You’re playing the G, exactly, that’s what gives it that sound. Right.

But the notes that attract your attention are the ones in the middle; that’s very important to it. You’d think you’d be drawn to the highest note, but you’re not.

I know!

The high one is just adding a little spice to it.

Right. Well, some of the singers . . . Remember the Davis Sisters? Skeeter Davis was one of the sisters.

I’ve read about them. I don’t think I have heard the sister act.

Well, they would sometimes do that kind of thing where one would hold the G and the other one would sing the D to E. And fiddle players do that also.

So you were intrigued by jazz—what inspired you to be writing songs for people like Eddy Arnold? Perfectly respectable thing to do but it’s not jazz.

Well, that was a totally different part of my life and I have to attribute a lot of that to the Dinning Sisters, because I traveled with them and I rehearsed them and I did arrangements for them, and mostly I had the privilege of hearing them in the room singing. Which was a thrilling experience because they were—I don't know if you've listened to them? they only have one CD out that I know of—but they are an absolutely unbelievable trio.

What were some of their trademark songs?

“Buttons And Bows,” they had a pretty good success with. That might be the only one that made some charts. But they did things . . . like for instance, they recorded “Brazil” and at the ending of the recording they slide up all together. They hit a chord—I think it's a D chord or whatever it is—and they glissando all the way up to a high inversion of that chord, and I've never heard a trio or vocal group do that before. It's just amazing. It's like a steel guitar; it was perfectly in tune all the way up.

That sibling telepathy.

Yeah.

So this gave you an appreciation for, what?, simpler chords and—

Yeah, for country sounds and hymn music. Of course I fell in love with hymns before I was ten years old when I had a chance to play an old pump organ. I loved hymns and I sang in the church choir for a long time too as a youngster. And I think that's where some of my love of the country sounds came from.

That's a very good starting point because those melodies are so influential in country music. Mixed in with a bit of the blues. So you had that in your background as well.

Yeah. I had a six-dollar Sears & Roebuck guitar which my folks bought for me and I learned to play a few chords, and learned to play some cowboy songs. I liked cowboy songs too.

But you're leaving out an important part, which is that you had a very famous mentor . . .

Sandburg? Yeah, that was very inspiring and it influenced me a lot because my parents really didn't think much of anything but classical music. They didn't have any high regard for when I was singing cowboy songs and stuff like that. But they admired Sandburg enormously—they were friends as a matter of fact—but they were great admirers of Sandburg's work and Sandburg was a lover of folk music. So it was that sort of link: they admired Sandburg, Sandburg admired the sort of music that I was intrigued with, then they started looking at me with a little more approval.

Did you feel that your parents eventually approved of your career choice? Did they get to see some of your success?

Yeah, my mother did anyway, but I think my father was absolutely mystified that I could make a living! [laughs] But my mother . . . they used to live in the Santa Cruz mountains and I'd go up there and visit, and there was a piano up there—in fact it was my childhood piano; it's in the next

room right now as I sit here. But anyway, she had a copy of “The Happy Whistler” sitting there, and she was very proud of that. She’d bring that to the attention of her friends.

[Irene can be faintly heard] My wife mentioned that my mother called herself Whistler’s Mother! [laughs heartily] I had forgotten that. That’s cute.

That is cute. What about Sandburg? Did he ever get to hear some of your stuff?

No, I wasn’t really composing anything then.

There was a little community up in a summer resort, a place just north of Chicago, where Sandburg and his family lived. They lived there year-round but we used to go and spend our summers up there. And as a contribution to the community they had what they called “sunset sings” and they would get together and sing, and Sandburg was active in that little group. I heard him sing and play. And then it wasn’t too much after that that he recorded something called *The American Songbag* for Decca, I think, and then he put out a book. He was one of the early collectors of some of that mountain music and cowboy music. Now there are musicologists that have extensive knowledge of that but Sandburg was one of the early . . . I mean I’m not a historian but—

He saw the value of it.

Yeah, right, exactly. And brought it from being music to be made fun of into a serious appreciation. You’re way too young to remember but there were people who used to make great sport of hillbilly singers and music.

Oh, there still are!

They’re still doing it, yeah! [chuckles]

Did you ever live here in Nashville?

Well, just a few years ago we did get a house down there—not too far from Jack’s place—and we were there for a couple of years. But we never moved out of our house in California. Our sons are both living in the area here and we have grandchildren.

Talk a little bit about Elvis, another icon that you rubbed elbows with extensively.

Yeah, that also came about because of the Aberbachs. I’m sure you know that they were very—

They were *his* gatekeepers.

Yeah, that’s true. But they recognized his potential and they got together and they moved right in with a business plan for themselves and Colonel Parker and Elvis. And that was right at the period when I was a writer for Hill and Range and the Aberbachs. So I was in the right place at the right time and they started sending him some of my stuff. So that’s how that came about.

So you got to know him some?

Oh yeah, I did. That was later. He asked to have me come down to where he was recording in Hollywood. Told one of his guys that he wanted to meet me so I got a call from one of his friends.

Did you sit down at the piano together?

Not really. At one point we were up at his house and I was playing “Tennessee Waltz” and they were singing. Elvis and Red West and Charlie Hodge. . . [Irene speaks in background] Johnny Rivers. Anyway there were enough to form a pretty good little choir. And we were in his rec room up in Bel Air, singing and playing together.

He loved piano, didn’t he?

Yeah, he did as a matter of fact. He sat down and played chords for himself and was singing a hymn of some kind, I’ve forgotten what it was.

Did you ever play on any of his sessions?

Yeah. He invited me to play on the soundtrack to the *It Happened At The World’s Fair* movie.

How did “I Really Don’t Want To Know” get to John Travolta for that movie?

I have no idea!

You have no idea.

Nope. No idea whatsoever. It just . . . all of a sudden there he was singing the first half of “I Really Don’t Want To Know” in *A Love Song For Bobby Long*.

Not a bad little movie.

Yeah, it was pretty good. At first I guess I was disappointed because he only did the first 32 bars or whatever, but it was really rather charming the way he does it.

Isn’t it a wonderful thing when your career gets to the point where these songs are just walking around by themselves and landing in people’s laps?

That’s true, it’s wonderful. That song has a life of its own and it’s very satisfying. Have you ever heard Boots Randolph’s instrumental of “I Really Don’t Want To Know”?

Not that I’m aware of.

Oh, it is absolutely . . . One of the jazz classics of years and years ago was Coleman Hawkins’ “Body And Soul.” Classic jazz record. Well, this is the country equivalent—not country at all, it’s just strictly a jazz instrumental but it’s lovely. It’s just wonderful.

I’ll hunt that down. Another one of my favorites of yours—and I think it should have been a bigger hit—was “Anything That’s Part Of You.”

Oh, is that right? Well, thank you.

I think that’s lovely. And such a little gem. Is that even two minutes long?

Yeah, I’ve wondered myself why a lot of the things that I wrote for Elvis were short.

But he sang that beautifully. He sang like his heart was truly broken.

I know. He does a great job on it.

I think that's one of his best vocal performances. It didn't have any mannerisms, just him singing at his best. He really could be a great ballad singer when the mood took him.

Yep.

When did you last see Elvis?

The last time I saw him was in Santa Monica. I'd been working on a song with Irving Gordon, who was the writer of "Unforgettable"? He was a friend of mine and we were working on something for Elvis, and I took the tape over to—what studio was it? In Culver City? I guess it was MGM—I took it over and he came down to the main entrance with somebody, I've forgotten who. But anyway, I gave him the tape and we just exchanged a few words. And that was the last time I saw him. I think that was maybe, '67?

Oh, so he was still in good shape.

Yeah, he was.

You never saw him in the years of decline.

Not really.

Probably just as well.

Yeah.

That turned out to be a very sad career.

Very much so.

From such a phenomenal beginning.

I know. I think he didn't know what hit him. I think he couldn't understand what all the fuss was about, you know. And who would? He was bigger than Jesus, for Chrissake! [chuckles] So to speak.

It's true. And for some people he still is. That's the scary part.

It's interesting, isn't it? But it's a wonderful thing for me because his [records of my] songs have more activity than when he first made them.

You and Irene have been together for quite a while. I saw a picture of her in a stewardess uniform, it looked like.

Yep, that's right. I met her on a plane. She was flying for American Airlines. We struck up a conversation on the plane and it went from there [chuckles].

So you've been together for some years.

Yeah. [to Irene] How long have we been married? Since 1962. I met her in 1960. So it's been a long time, yeah.

So it sounds like you didn't have too many bachelor years.

Nope, I didn't. I leapt from one situation to another. But I got the right one this time. I finally got it right.

Sounds like it was a good leap! Is Irene musical?

Yeah, she's not a serious professional but she is very musical. She's actually a singer-songwriter but her real strength is in lyrics. She's written hundreds of lyrics; wrote a lot before I ever met her. She's got a songwriting credit in a movie called *Purple People Eater*. She's really excellent. She and Billy Swan and I collaborated on a couple of things, and he recorded at least one—I can't remember if he recorded more than one—on one of his Epic albums.

She doesn't like me to tell people but she plays accordion [laughs, as does Irene in the background]. I can't get her to bring it out when there's anybody around.

Take her down to Louisiana, she'd be hip!

Right. Absolutely. I love the instrument myself.

Yeah, there're so many variations on it. If you look at the French concertina style—that can be so poignant and so different from the full-throated Lawrence Welk-type thing. And then the Cajun squeezebox is a whole other thing.

Oh, I love the Cajun stuff.

And it all serves a purpose.

I'll say!

If nothing else I guess we can thank people like Carl Sandburg for releasing us from musical snobbery.

That's very well put. Exactly right.

No place for it. Even disco probably serves some purpose!

Oh, sure. And the best of it will probably survive.

I might make an exception for rap . . . [laughs ironically]

It's not entirely without value but the huge popularity of it bothers me because I think it's doing irreversible damage to the art of melody and harmonization, all the stuff that was so prevalent back in the era of the Johnny Mercers and the Irving Berlins.

Yeah, I think the current generation is missing out on a lot of stuff.

The only place where I see hope for it is Nashville.

Well, that's true. There's sort of a repository of that. They're kind of like the abbots were in the Middle Ages that preserved the art and the writing.

Because there are people here who still know the satisfaction of writing a good melody and marrying it to the perfect lyric, and seeing people react emotionally to something that's meant to engage all the emotions—not just anger, or whatever rap and hip-hop are trying to get at. It seems to be kinda savage.

Yeah, it's a little frightening, isn't it?

Do you regret not being better recognized as an artist?

Well, I blew the opportunities that I had and I guess there was a reason for it, because I'm really not enough of an extrovert to be comfortable in that role. I don't think I'm suited for that. I think there's a reason why I preferred to be in the background.

I think the background's a better place to be, personally. I mean you only have to look at an Elvis or a Hank Williams to realize the danger of that other life, that extroverted thing.

I know. And they fall prey to the drugs and the alcohol and everything. It's a rough life.