

Talking To A Busy Hillbilly

■ Marty Stuart discusses album projects and his role as a country collector

"We tend to do things in 10-year cycles, as far as I can see," Marty Stuart says, assessing country music's current climate. "Here we are at the end of another decade — and it's been a dangd good decade."

"The thing that always keeps my faith up in country music is that the cycle always comes back around. In my opinion, we're like a bunch of hillbillies who hit the Ed McMahon lottery about five or six years ago. We got a bigger trailer, a bigger car, and we got Saturday-night rich there for a while. But, eventually, you can only spend so much money, enjoy so much fame, and get so comfortable. Then, one day, you wake up and go, 'I've got to get back to church.'"

Laughing, Stuart continues his humorous explanation, adding, "It's like a weekend in New Orleans: When you're in the middle of Mardi Gras, everything looks wonderful. But when you come home, you realize, 'I did eat those 15 pigeon eggs that night!' You have to pay the fiddler."

Next month, Stuart starts recording his new MCA album, *The Pilgrim*. He says, "I didn't see any reason to make a record last year. I know when my timing's in and when my point of view's out. I realize that the best thing I can do is go back inside and figure out the next few years, rather than trying to keep up with the pack."

That doesn't mean that Stuart hasn't been busy. In addition to his tour schedule, he wrote and produced the all-star track "Same Old Train" for the recently released *Tribute To Tradition* album. He produced a brand-new Warner Bros. album for his wife, Grand Ole Opry star Connie Smith. Last month, photographs he's taken of country legends were featured with the work of former *Life* magazine staffer Ed Clark in a photographic exhibit in Nashville. And recordings, photographs, and handwritten lyrics from Stuart's vast collection of

COUNTRY FLASHBACK

1 YEAR AGO

• No. 1: "Everywhere" — Tim McGraw

5 YEARS AGO

• No. 1: "No Time To Kill" — Clint Black

10 YEARS AGO

• No. 1: "Summer Wind" — Desert Rose Band

15 YEARS AGO

• No. 1: "Lady Down On Love" — Alabama (second week)

20 YEARS AGO

• No. 1: "Heartbreaker" — Dolly Parton (second week)

25 YEARS AGO

• No. 1: "Ridin' My Thumb To Mexico" — Johnny Rodriguez

country memorabilia surfaced on the 10-CD boxed set *The Complete Hank Williams*.

Stuart discussed the projects in a recent interview with R&R.

All-Star Tribute

The *Tribute To Tradition* album closes with "Same Old Train," which features Joe Diffie, Alison Krauss, Randy Travis, Patty Loveless, Clint Black, Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris, Earl Scruggs, Ricky Skaggs, Pam Tillis, Travis Tritt, and Dwight Yoakam. Stuart says, "The only thing I knew going in was that I had to get Merle Haggard — because I stole the title off of him! I told somebody at Sony,

"This record ain't comin' home until Haggard sings on it. I had to go to Dallas to get him, to California to get Dwight. I got some Advantage miles off of it, but it was a statement that was worth making, I think."

Explaining the recording process, he says, "When I got to the studio, I didn't know how it would turn out. I just knew that I wanted to hear a mountain sound. I didn't want to think about singing, so I called Joe Diffie, and he came by to lay down some vocals. He was just perfect for it. It was supposed to be a demo, but when I heard it, I realized it was the master. From there, it was just a matter of casting. Putting names on paper was easy, but getting them was another thing. It took me and [manager] Bonnie Garner a lot of calling to get people to come in to do it, but it was a labor of love."

In addition to the artists' cooperation, record labels supported the project, since Sony/Nashville had announced plans to make a \$50,000 advance against *Tribute To Tradition* album royalties to benefit the Country Music Retirement Center. Stuart says, "The fact that Sony had designated the funds, everybody got in line with that. The stars lined up."

Country Collector

When Mercury began planning *The Complete Hank Williams*, executives realized that Stuart possesses one of the largest private collections of country music memorabilia, including unreleased tapes, original lyric sheets, photographs, and musical instruments. Stuart says he never planned to become a historian and collector when he began stockpiling country music magazines at the age of 12. Stuart says, "Before I ever got to Nashville, it started with *Country Song Roundup*. That's basically the thing that got me kicked out of school and up here."

When Stuart joined bluegrass pioneer Lester Flatt's band in the '70s, he cleared \$30 a week after expenses and saving a preset amount of money, one of Flatt's rules for the teenager. Stuart continued buying country records and books, and the "museum piece" came following Flatt's death in 1979, when Stuart acquired the singer's Martin guitar.

"In the early '80s, when I started trying to make records, I started buying old rhinestone suits that [the late Hollywood tailor] Nudie made that everyone else was ashamed to wear," Stuart says. "It was just an old lick that I reused. The collection started snowballing, and I really don't know when the craziness started, but all of a sudden I didn't have to ask anybody for items. They found me. Then it got completely nuts."

Stuart's collection, which is now stored in five warehouses, may eventually be displayed in a special



SHARING 'TRADITION' — Joe Diffie, left, joins songwriter/producer Marty Stuart in the studio for the first session of "Same Old Train." The song, which closes the recently released *Tribute To Tradition* album, also features guest vocals by Alison Krauss, Randy Travis, Patty Loveless, Clint Black, Merle Haggard, Emmylou Harris, Earl Scruggs, Ricky Skaggs, Pam Tillis, Travis Tritt, and Dwight Yoakam.

area of the new Country Music Hall of Fame building planned for downtown Nashville. Stuart isn't sure exactly how much the collection is worth. Although he admits that he's received a "solid offer" of \$2.5 million for the items, he'll probably never sell.

He purchased most of his Hank Williams items from the singer's sister, Irene, who had expressed an interest in meeting Stuart during a conversation with the owner of the Great Escape, a used record and book dealer in Nashville. Stuart first met her when they got together for dinner following a performance at Dallas Texas Stadium.

Recalling the initial encounter, Stuart says, "I could tell she was sizing me up all the time, because she'd been burned so many times by people. I never talked about Hank very much at all at dinner. All of a sudden, I'm holding the words to these incredible songs and the letters he wrote home to his mama. I knew there was some responsibility of me being there. It wasn't to go exploit Hank Williams, but to protect and honor her brother. I sort of had the rules set up for me."

Before purchasing the items, Stuart contacted Hank Williams Jr.'s office and learned that the younger Williams has a policy of not buying anything that belonged to his father. Stuart says, "If the vibe isn't right around a piece — or if there's squabbling going on within the family — I don't want it anyway. I don't feel like any of this stuff I've collected belongs to me. I feel like that, for some reason, I've been chosen as a caretaker. It belongs to the world, so it's your responsibility to find a way to make that happen."

Behind The Lens

As for photography, Stuart says, "It's always been the last hobby I could claim. It was the only thing I did that really wasn't work. I caught onto it because my mom was like the queen of shutterbugs. There's always been a camera around, like a guitar. When I went to work for Lester, the guys would sit around the bus and say, 'If I'd only had a camera when I worked that show with Hank or Elvis....' So I bought a little Instamatic camera

and just started taking pictures of people I loved. Those people are like family to me. I always approached it like I was taking pictures of family members."

One of Stuart's favorite photos is a black-and-white shot he took of the late singer/guitarist Merle Travis near a gasoline pump. He says, "Those days, to me, are like vignettes. Even when we lose somebody like that, when I get lonesome for him, I go back to that day and relive that afternoon with him. Right before I got my first record deal with CBS, he told me everything in the world *not* to do. I still feed on that advice."

For the photographic exhibit, Stuart provided one print of each shot, which he sold, donating the money to charity. Two book publishers have already contacted him about compiling a coffee-table book of his photographs and recollections. Stuart says, "If this does turn into a permanent exhibit at the Hall of Fame, we should probably do a book that showcases the collection of guitars, manuscripts, documents, art, and photographs."

Album Projects

Stuart is excited about the response to wife Connie Smith's new self-titled album, her first major-label release in several years. He says, "We made that record two years ago, and I knew it was a modern classic that was going to live for a long time. [Warner-Reprise-Nashville President] Jim Ed Norman was so gracious about it. I told him, 'I don't think we'll compete with radio acts at this moment.' He said, 'Don't even worry about it. Go make a great record of what Connie likes.' I said, 'That's hard-core country,' and he said, 'That's what we need.' All of a sudden, *USA Today*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone* are hitting on it, because it's a fresh drink of water."

Regarding his upcoming album, Stuart calls it "a rompin', stompin', ramblin' journey through the backdoor of 20th century country music that's guaranteed to come out on the front porch of the 21st century." Pausing, he laughs, "Now make out of that what you will. I've got it about 70% complete in my head."

— Calvin Gilbert



HISTORIC MOMENT — Hank Williams Sr.'s two children visited the Country Music Hall of Fame recently to witness the unveiling of an eight-foot bronze sculpture of their late father. Montana artist Bill Rains premiered his latest work during a party celebrating what would have been the singer's 75th birthday and the release of the 10-CD boxed set *The Complete Hank Williams*. It was also the first time that Williams' two children had ever met face-to-face. Pictured are (l-r) Hank Williams Jr., Rains, and Jett Williams.