

Shaver And Coe: Two Outlaws Look At Sixty

BY RAY WADDELL

NASHVILLE—Behind the blinding mid-'70s spotlight that illuminated outlaw superstars Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, there lurked several other country music outsiders. Few were more influential or harder to figure than the rough-hewn iconoclasts David Allan Coe and Billy Joe Shaver.

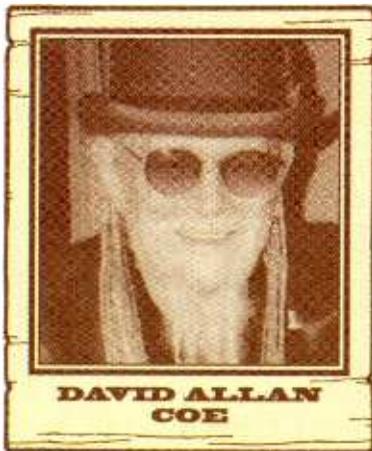
No one in the movement had more actual "outlaw" credibility than Coe, who spent some 20 years of his life in institutions, including some stretches in prison. With his biker looks and jailhouse tattoos, Coe looked just as likely to deliver a butt-kicking as a song.

While the bestowment of the "outlaw" brand has been variously attributed to DJs and journalists, Coe insists the term originated from a newspaper photo of a stage appearance he made in Louisiana with Jennings and Nelson. Coe wore his Outlaws biker club colors and packed a pistol. He says the incident didn't sit too well with his biker pals.

"I got beat up for wearing my colors onstage, which was against the rules," he recalls. Musically, Coe says, outlaw music was a rebellion against the lush strings

of the "countryopolitan" sound and a desire to truly reproduce the studio faithfully onstage.

"To me, 'outlaw music' and 'outlaw' are two separate things," Coe notes. "To be considered an outlaw then, you didn't [need] to



DAVID ALLAN COE

have done something criminally wrong, but musically you had to be different. And that has happened all along in country music, from Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell to Little Jimmy Dickens."

As a songwriter, Coe was capable of such sensitive fare as "Would You Lay With Me in a Field of Stone" and "Jody Like a Melody," as well as rougher songs like "Longhaired Redneck," "If

That Ain't Country," and a brace of X-rated albums he's still trying to live down. While he had his hits, including "Take This Job and Shove It" for Johnny Paycheck and his own version of "The Ride," mainstream success mostly eluded Coe.

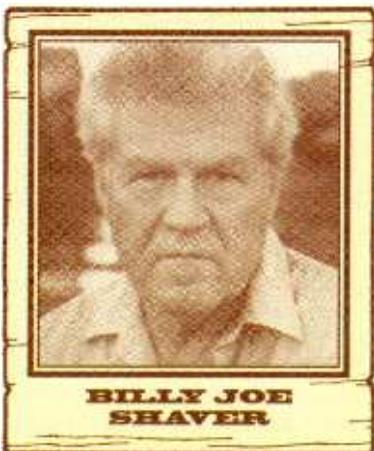
"A mistake was made in my career in that they tried to promote me the same way they did George Jones or Loretta Lynn, and I was not appealing to that audience," says Coe, who still plays some 200 dates a year to packed houses. "I was more of a Jackson Browne-, Neil Young-, or Charlie Daniels-type of entertainer. But I think [that] if I had anything I could do over in my life, it would be not letting Shel Silverstein talk me into recording those two X-rated albums. Those were meant to be sung around the campfire for bikers, and I still don't sing those songs in concert."

He admits that his refusal to play the game most likely held him back: "I didn't go to lunch, I didn't have meetings." Today, at 62, Coe relates more to occasional tour mates Kid Rock, Pantera, and Hank Williams III ("I like that boy") than to mainstream country. "I'm a professional per-

son. Elvis Presley told me, 'Play to the audience in front of you.'"

THE ROUGH SIDE OF SHAVER

For his part, Billy Joe Shaver helped jumpstart the whole outlaw scene, when Waylon Jennings



BILLY JOE SHAVER

recorded an entire album of Shaver's songs, the multi-platinum *Honky Tonk Heroes*, in 1973. "Waylon really stuck his neck out for me," says Shaver, who turned 60 this year. "After that album hit, which everybody said it wouldn't, everybody else changed, too."

Like Coe, Shaver tours steadily, but the road has been rough of late. Shaver's son and lead gui-

tarist, Eddy, died of a drug overdose on New Year's Eve, and Shaver himself recently suffered a heart attack. He says his audiences today "don't seem to be quite as crazy—of course, rules have fixed that. But they appreciate your music. They're mostly young, but they know the songs by heart. Sometimes a real pretty girl will come runnin' up and say, 'My grandma told me about you.'"

As for the outlaw music, Shaver says, "I knew it was good. Waylon was known as a guy who could pick songs as good as Elvis Presley and was a great writer himself. Waylon, with his arrangements, had a lot to do with the way people played, and everybody jumped on it. And Waylon didn't have nothin' to go by, but as people started to copy it, they had a plowed row to follow."

Shaver is equally complimentary of Nelson: "He's one tough hombre. If he was a politician and cleaned up, he'd be president. Willie is all-knowing and wise."

As for the outlaw times, Shaver says he wouldn't have had it any other way. "It was wild and crazy," he concedes, "but it sure was fun. It was fun for everybody that got to hear the music and had it move them."

Outlaws

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even that might not be enough to break the dam."

Certain edgier country stations, particularly in Texas, are getting



SLOVEN

wind of a developing scene. "There are definitely some rumblings going on, and it's exciting to watch," says Smokey Rivers, assistant PD at KPLX (the Wolf) Dallas. Rivers puts Republic/Universal artist Pat Green and Charlie Robison at the forefront of the scene, "at least on a mass-appeal scale. Charlie and Pat have been mainstays on our station since we launched three years ago."

Rivers would add Keen, Ingram, Gary Allan, and a resurgent Travis Tritt to the list of acts fueling the fire. "It's a bit grittier, more directed toward men than most of what Nashville has put out recently, and they sing about more real-life things," Rivers says. "It's a sound we've embraced at the Wolf. It's really good [music], and it matches up well with [artists like] Tim McGraw and Brooks & Dunn—you can play them back-to-back, and they sound great together."

Troy Gentry agrees that male listeners seem to relate more to the edgier music. "We're giving guys an opportunity to come back to country music. They're seeing that country music can be cool, and they're spending their hard-earned money for music about real people."

Butler says, "Country music has gone way toward pop—and that's not necessarily a bad thing, because some of it has been very successful. But at the same time, there are lots of disenfranchised people who call themselves country music fans who are not getting satisfaction out of the music heard on country radio. There is a gaping hole that somebody or a group of somebodies could step right into."

If the music does break, some think it would be in spite of country radio. Calling the success of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack a "hopeful por-

tent," Fulks says, "that shows people will support good music, even if radio doesn't. The main thing is loosening the death grip of radio format and consultants on country music."

Wayne says, "The irony is, you devote your whole life to this stuff, you learn the licks and learn the songs, then some

'I think it's going to bust open, and it should, because I know people want to hear this kind of music. As soon as radio figures that out and where they fit in, this could be huge.'

—JACK INGRAM

dumb radio sumbitch changes the game on you. No wonder people like Dale Watson are pissed off."

Ingram says his audiences alone bespeak of a deep potential listener pool. "We get the starched shirts and jeans as well as the people who go see Bare-

naked Ladies," he says, adding that, "by all means," he considers himself a country artist. "Tom Petty is more country than a lot of what you hear on country radio. Just like Willie Nelson had more in common with the Sex Pistols than Kenny Rogers."

Keen thinks that if a new outlaw scene takes off, it must be spearheaded by core acts the way Jennings and Nelson did a generation ago. "How it works is you have your pioneers, then a group of pretty good imitators come behind them, and then it gets watered down, and you have to live with that for five or six years. Regardless of whether you like Garth Brooks, the guy was a pioneer in bringing this real big, Barnum & Bailey thing to country music. I was even interested in what he was doing, and since then people [have been] trying to do the same thing, and it just doesn't work."

So does Ingram think the scene will get bigger? "Yes, I do, but a lot of things have to happen. I've played 500 dates in the last three years, and when I play a gig on Friday night in Texas, 1,000 people show up at \$15 a ticket, and it's real to them."

Ingram says that he doesn't think the scene is too fragmented or its boundaries too vague, adding that the same situation probably existed 25 years ago. "Time will weed out who was part of a 'scene' and who wasn't."

According to Lewis, larger cultural factors may be at work here. "If there's anything I believe, having lived long enough to see cycles, it's when we have cultural shifts like we're having now with the war and the recession. Creative people begin producing more things, and con-



RIVERS

sumers look for pain outside their own and become a little tired of fluff."

And if the movement inspires imitators and bandwagon-hoppers? "I don't have a problem with anybody trying to make art who believes in what they're doing," Ingram says. "At that point, I say, 'Do it better than me,' and hopefully I'll shine through."