

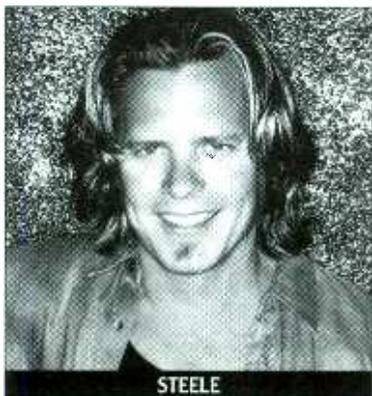
Nashville Scene™



by Phyllis Stark

ONE MORE TRY: Despite being one of the most sought after songwriters in Nashville, **Jeffrey Steele** wasn't content to only let others perform his music. That's why he's taking another stab at performing and signed with Sony Music Nashville earlier this year. Sony's Monument Records imprint will release his album, *Somethin' in the Water*, Jan. 29.

Steele previously was part of **Boy Howdy** from 1988 to 1995. The group released three albums on Curb Records and had three top 20 hits. A brief solo deal on Curb netted one more album. As a writer, his songs have become hits for **LeAnn Rimes**, **Collin Raye**, **Diamond Rio**, **John Michael Montgomery**, **Gerald Levert**, and scores of others.



STEELE

So why would a 40-year-old father of four who's making a great living as a songwriter want to put himself through the meat grinder of everything that comes with trying to launch a solo career? Steele says it's "probably because I'm still trying to figure it out," and admits, "I'm probably an idiot for doing it."

But, he says, "I love these songs so much that I'm willing to risk everything and walk away from everything I've built up over the last seven years. I love performing." He adds that it was the songs themselves that made him want to be an artist again: "I can best pull them off."

Of his brief solo tenure with Curb, he says, "I made a good record but I don't think there was any support there. They put out one single, and I kind of got frustrated with it. I didn't want to beat the pavement anymore." But his attitude has changed. Now, he says, "I'm back begging. I have kneepads on."

"In the music business, you spend years climbing up on your soapbox and when you get up there everybody pelts you with rocks," Steele continues. "I'm ready to get up on my soapbox and let everybody

throw rocks at me."

The album initially was rushed toward an Oct. 30 target when the album's title cut, its uptempo single, got off to a fast start at radio. But it was recently pushed back to next year after momentum on the single slowed for a time in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, when feel-good tunes were upstaged by those with patriotic and uplifting lyrics.

Steele produced *Somethin' in the Water* with **Scott Baggett** and **Al Anderson**, and he wrote or co-wrote all of the songs on the album. Anderson's influence is evident throughout, particularly on the first single, which he co-wrote with Steele and **Bob DiPiero**.

"When I met Al, my whole life turned around," Steele says. "He made me remember why I started singing and playing in the first place. He says, 'Do what you do and don't try to make any excuses for it. Sometimes your flaws are your greatest strengths.'" Now, Steele says of Anderson, "I'm just stealing all his stuff."

There are just two songs Steele gave to other artists to cut that he wishes he'd saved for his own project. One is "I'm Tryin'," the **Trace Adkins** single currently at No. 13 on the Hot Country Singles & Tracks chart. The other is **Tim McGraw's** album cut "The Cowboy in Me."

But even without those two songs, Steele's album is packed with potential hits. "I really feel good about this," Steele says of the project. "I feel like I've really done it the way I wanted. I've never really stood up for my music before."

ON THE ROW: Former Peer Music creative director **Kirk Boyer** joins Lyric Street Records as director of A&R. He replaces **Shelby Kennedy**, who left the post several months ago. Also, **Kortney Kayle** has been granted a release from the Lyric Street artist roster.

MCA Nashville director of mid-South promotion **Mike Severson** exits. Secondary promotion manager **Kimberly Dunn** is promoted to Severson's former position. Replacing Dunn is former promotion coordinator **Shane Allen**. **Brian Thiele** is upped from promotion assistant to promotion coordinator.

Billy Yates has exited the Columbia Records artist roster.

Mark McGuinn has signed with Scott Stem Publicity for public relations representation.

Haggard Returns To His 'Roots' On Latest Album From Anti-

BY CHRIS MORRIS

LOS ANGELES—Merle Haggard has made a lot of albums in his 40-year recording career, but he says of his new collection, *Roots Volume 1*, on the eclectic Epitaph Records' Anti- imprint, "This is my favorite album, I think."

The material on the set, due Nov. 6, is close to the veteran country vocalist's heart. The album, his second for Anti-, contains three new Haggard originals (published by Merle Haggard Music [BMI]), plus two songs associated with honky-tonker Hank Thompson, a pair originally recorded by country giant Hank Williams, and—perhaps most importantly—five numbers originated by Lefty Frizzell, one of Haggard's greatest influences.

Haggard explains, "The whole picture is to try to preserve that body of work that happened from the transition from big brass bands to Elvis. There's about a five- or six-year period in there, before Elvis and Ray Price came in and changed everything. There was some music that was played by Hank Williams and Lefty Frizzell and Hank Thompson, people like that, that was absolutely wonderful."

The focus of the album is Frizzell, the late honky-tonk titan who brought 16-year-old Merle Haggard onstage for the first time to front his band at the Rainbow Gardens in Bakersfield, Calif., in 1953.

A confluence of unusual events—including Haggard's enlistment of Frizzell's own guitarist—led to the making of *Roots Volume 1*.

Haggard says he was unaware that Norm Stephens, who played lead on Frizzell's earliest hits, was virtually his neighbor in Northern California until pianist Doug Colosio spotted an ad by Stephens offering guitar lessons in a Redding, Calif., paper.

Haggard recalls, "I said, 'You're telling me that Norman Stephens, the guitar player who played on 'If You've Got the Money I've Got the Time,' is livin' over there?' It was just unbelievable. It blew me away."

He adds, "I was afraid to call him for a little bit, 'cause I was so impressed with his guitar playing... I said, 'Doug, call him.' Come to find out that all these years he'd been here right down the street, and out of courtesy he hadn't said anything to me. He'd been a civil engineer, and he made a great career out of that. He retired, and about eight months prior to my call had just sort of given up on music, put his guitar under the bed.

"Anyway, here's this great guitar player standing there," Haggard continues, "and I said, 'You know, I think we ought to start recording just as quick as we can.' And so we did. Virtually within hours, we were making records."

Stephens—who had not appeared on record for half a century, though he did tour with Thompson's Brazos Valley Boys—speaks warmly of his experience with Haggard.



"I was just flattered that Merle would ask me to do the recordings with him," Stephens says. "It was rather ominous when we started doing those same songs I did 50 years ago. Of course, for one thing, I hadn't played for a while, so I was a little rusty—in fact, a lot rusty—but he was kind enough to kinda let me play myself back into shape."

Haggard was moved to further duplicate the sound of Frizzell's first Dallas recordings when refurbishment work forced him to temporarily vacate his home and move into a nearby property he was selling.

Haggard says, "I looked at this room, and I said, 'My God, sonofabitch, I bet this room would sound great in a recording! It's got this wood here. I wonder if it'd sound like [Frizzell producer] Jim Beck's old studio.' And it did, as you can hear."

Epitaph president Andy Kaulkin says *Roots Volume 1* may feed an appetite among contemporary listeners.

"We can't help but notice the success of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*," Kaulkin says. "This project was not contrived in any way—the music just came out of him through very organic means—but there's obviously a hunger out there for traditional rootsy country music, and that's what this album is. I even feel like something's got to give at country radio. We might even have a shot at getting something played, as crazy as that

sounds." The label will work "If You've Got the Money I've Got the Time" at country radio.

Shortly after the album's release date, Haggard—who is self-managed and booked by Lance and Bobby Roberts at the Bobby Roberts Co. in Goodlettsville, Tenn.—begins a series of Canadian tour dates.

Kaulkin says, "We're going to do television advertising in the key Merle Haggard traditional country markets, in Texas and places like that. We went to Nashville and met with CMT, and we're trying to work some things out with them. We want to do some television in those more traditional markets and work with the racks. We're going to make sure that all the old-time Merle Haggard fans know about this record."

"We're doing a huge publicity push on it. I'm trying to get as much coverage there as possible," Kaulkin continues. "We're trying to get him on television as much as possible. I feel like the best means for this kind of record is going to be at the retail level. It's one of those records where, if you play it in the store, people will say, 'Wow, what is that?' You don't have to be a country fan to appreciate it."

Allen Larman, head buyer at Rhino Records in Los Angeles, says of *Roots Volume 1*, "I think it's going to do great. We did so well with the last album [*If I Could Only Fly*]. It established Merle with a whole new audience. I think there's a new appreciation for his music, and that type of honky-tonk sound is really popular."



And The Winner Is. Rhonda Vincent & the Rage were named entertainer of the year at the International Bluegrass Music Assn. Awards, marking their first win in that category. Vincent, pictured here, accepts the group's trophy onstage at the Kentucky Center for the Arts in Louisville.