

## NASHVILLE VOLUME 1: TEAR THE WOODPILE DOWN

By Marty Stuart

I came to Nashville from the land of Jimmie Rodgers, looking for a place, a place to belong inside the world of country music.

It was around 2:30 on the Thursday morning of Labor Day weekend 1972 when I first set foot in the city some refer to as the “Athens of the South.” I had ridden a Greyhound bus 430 miles from Philadelphia, Mississippi for what was supposed to be a weekend visit with Roland White. Roland was the mandolin player in Lester Flatt’s band. I had met him on the bluegrass festival circuit the previous summer. We had become friends and at the end of the run he had invited me to come to Nashville. He also remarked that he would ask Lester if I could “ride along with them for a show or two.”

When I stepped off the bus that morning I was expecting Roland to be there to meet me. He was nowhere in sight. Thirty minutes later he still hadn’t arrived. As I waited I couldn’t help but notice how dark it was. No moon, no stars, the only movement in the sky was the night birds. They became my welcoming committee and seemed to look upon me with a lonesome, knowing, sadness from high atop the timberline peak of the city.

I had always dreamed of coming to Nashville. However, I didn’t think I would get here this fast. I wanted to live in the land of rhinestone suits. It was country boy Hollywood, the air castle of the South, a dream factory. I didn’t see much glamour before me that night at the bus station, though. Mostly a steady stream of tear-stained travelers. Strangers who looked as if they were coming and going from shipwrecks, home wrecks, shattered dreams, cyclones, mysterious scrapes and jailhouses. They touched off the mood of the night, looking like fugitives slipping into the abyss of the Greyhound corridors. The first live music I heard in Music City came from a harmonica-playing street performer. He was standing over a manhole cover across the street from the bus station with steam forming around him. It gave him a phantom-like presence. He played “Pins and Needles in My Heart” by Roy Acuff and then moved on without saying a word, and not a soul seemed to care.

I was beginning to get anxious as Roland was nowhere to be found. I picked up my bags and walked to the other side of the Greyhound station in hopes that he might be waiting there. He wasn’t. What was waiting on me was a vision that I had not counted on seeing. I came face to face with the Mother Church of Country Music—the Ryman Auditorium. Just the sight of the place nearly drove me to my knees. The Ryman represented so much to me.

When I stood in front of the Ryman tabernacle that first time, it was eighty years old and I was thirteen. I felt a sense of belonging behind those doors. It seemed like home. It didn’t matter to me that the building looked weary and in need of repairs. Some of the windows were broken out or boarded up, but somehow her dignity seemed intact.

The atmosphere around the place was seedier than anything I’d ever seen. Lots of winos stumbling up and down the alleyways. Busy like rats, shadowy forms of hookers and more edgy people moving fast. Signs that read “The Wheel,” “Night Club,” “Demons’ Den,” “Adult XXX,” “Peep Shows,” “The Ernest Tubb Record Shop,” “Grammer

Guitars,” and “Live Country Music” all beckoned. I was filling up my eyes with country music history, low life, and flashing neon signs when I heard Roland call my name. I felt as though I’d been rescued.

He collected me then we disappeared into the night traveling in his 1965 Chevrolet car and headed toward the outer edge of what seemed to be a divine appointment. The one that was to set me on my way and mark the true downbeat of my journey. I’ve found it to be a gift that was placed in my hands to use at will. I’ve squandered it countless times since then, but at that moment even at the dividing line of the late night darkness my trip seemed to be surrounded in a pure white celestial beam of light.

From that moment on life moved fast. By the end of the next weekend Lester Flatt had offered me a job in his band. One week later, I proudly carried Lester’s guitar and walked beside him into the backstage area of the Ryman Auditorium. Entering the Grand Ole Opry with Lester Flatt was the equivalent of walking into the Vatican with the Pope. His endorsement gave me instant acceptance into the family of country music.

I felt honored to be among the glorious parade of the sons and daughters of the mountains, the valleys, the plains, the bayous, and the cotton fields. A people who brought their culture, their heritage, their very hearts and souls as their gifts to the microphone. This era of country musicians was the rural conscience. Their works were elegant, uncharted, filled with naked emotions that were simply beautiful. As *Time* magazine once wrote of the Carter Family’s music, “In the light of perfect beauty, tears are the only answer.” That’s how I felt about my new found family and the life that went along with it. It was an unbelievable way to begin a musical journey. I was now part of the world of traditional country music. My dream had come true. I’d found myself a home encamped amongst the masters of country music. They were my shepherds, my chiefs. I had total access to the wit and wisdom of some of American music’s greatest architects. They were Old Testament kind of figures who were of settled character and cast mighty shadows over the music and industry they’d created. I felt at home in spirit amongst the likes of these people although I didn’t quite comprehend why I was chosen to be there. There was another set of characters that I was drawn to just as strongly who were shaking things up on the other side of Music Row. They were being called outlaws. They also seemed to welcome my presence any time I’d come around.

Their brand of country music had a mercury running through its veins that could be traced back to somewhere between Jimmie Rodgers final dose of laudanum, Hank Williams’ last drink of whiskey, and the first road dog amphetamine that Johnny Cash ever swallowed. They didn’t disrespect the old timers, as a matter of fact they went to great lengths to honor them, but they had a renegade way of doing business that made the legends talk quietly amongst themselves. I felt perfectly at home in spirit amongst these rascals as well. So I established my perimeters somewhere between the traditional values of Lester Flatt’s camp and the chopping mirror in Waylon’s dressing room. As a teenager with no particular destination in mind, I hid the part of myself that could only be described as a traditional country music purist underneath the rock of ages. I clung to my job with Lester Flatt, but in my spare time I lit out to explore, ponder, question, collaborate, innovate all of country music’s possibilities that interested me. Musical exploration was the general feeling going around after sundown on the streets of Nashville and I wanted to be right in the middle of things.

The revolution of country music was already in motion. Change was the watch word and it was exciting. Bob Dylan, The Byrds, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, the Johnny Cash television show and a thirteen year old girl named Tanya Tucker had electrified the town and set the stage for a new wave of a more progressive style of country music that was starting to be made. Questions were being asked. Waylon asked, "Are you sure Hank done it this way?" Johnny Cash asked, "What is truth?" The truth was, the industry was phasing out the Old Testament world of country music. Hard country songs, fiddles, steel guitars, telecasters and rhinestone suits were declared obsolete. However, not everyone got the memo. In Lester Flatt's band, nothing changed except the audience. After one successful concert performing for a college audience in Cincinnati one evening, our lives changed dramatically. When the sun came up the next morning, in addition to the Opry shows, bluegrass festivals and country package shows we played, we were now relegated to rock star status thanks to the tune *Dueling Banjos* in the movie *Deliverance*. We found ourselves playing old time country music to young audiences who came to shows to see us playing alongside the likes of Gram Parsons, the Eagles, Kool & the Gang, Chick Corea, and Steppenwolf. The whole adventure felt very outlaw to me and I loved being a part of it. We were riding high and then I experienced one of my first monumental Nashville heartbreaks, Lester passed away. I became a teenage musician without a job. Vassar Clements, and Doc & Merle Watson employed me for a few months in the summer of 1979. Johnny Cash then hired me for a 5 year stay that lasted a lifetime. That tour was like a mad dog cyclone that took me all over planet Earth, into outer space, past the gates of heaven and hell, and then dropped me off out in the middle of nowhere.

It was then and there that I became acquainted with the beauty of the middle of nowhere. The thing that matters most there is creativity. From there you can stage dreams that are big enough to get you back to civilization. The sky's the limit. It was from there that I formed my first commercial band, got myself a record deal, had a hit or two, tried to play country music, but it felt like rock & roll. I had limited success but it all led me back to the woodshed, in the middle of nowhere. Again I tried. I got myself another record deal, formed another band, had a decade's worth of hits, that amounted to my first full round of hillbilly stardom, blazed a trail or two, watched the lights go out on the 20<sup>th</sup> century and then woke up one morning only to realize that I had hillbilly rocked myself right back into the middle of nowhere. This time, I wasn't alone. Some of my friends and mentors from the Old Testament days of country music were also there. Porter Wagoner greeted me by saying, "Welcome to the weeds." My old boss Johnny Cash was there and looking for his way out as well. He said, "We're not alone. You'll find country music itself right over there." Before he left this world, his assessment of country music was, "In trying to become all things to all people, we have virtually become nothing." So we started playing country music again. During those times J.R. was making recordings with Rick Rubin. Any time he'd call I'd go play guitar on his sessions. One particular session that stands out was when he recorded his rendition of Jimmie Rodgers' song *The One Rose*. During the take it felt like the studio turned upside down. Something special happened. When we finished the song we shook hands and agreed that both of us had just been a part of the re-setting of country music's spiritual direction. Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers were there and they felt it too. J.R. left this world in good musical and spiritual standing. So did the Wagonmaster, Porter Wagoner. Me and the band gathered around him and I produced his last recording. Porter went to heaven with his legendary, trademark country music sound intact. After being a part of helping my old chiefs finish out their legacies, I then found it time to deal with myself.

The middle of nowhere is a good place to think about things. The tough part is there's nothing around you to hold back the truth. And the truth about myself wasn't pretty and the mirror told me so. I had virtually run out of integrity, dignity, and creativity. I was low on love and had 35 cents worth of fame left. My divine appointment that I had felt assigned to me at 2:30 in the morning on my first night in Nashville, seemed to have lost all of its divinity. My choice was to stand still, get sober, listen to my heart, and try and bring it all back down to earth and wait for heaven to speak.

All that was left of my 90s office staff was Maria-Elena Orbea and Mary Gordon. However, just past the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, heaven spoke by sending statesmen-like comrades into my new path. One by one came Stinson, Vaughan, Martin, Conley, Clark and Dottore. All musical missionaries or mercenaries depending on which way you view them. We formed a group and called ourselves Marty Stuart & His Fabulous Superlatives. We are named after a catch phrase of a local Nashville florist. I knew from the first rehearsal with the Superlatives that I had found the band of a lifetime, my legacy band, fellow warriors. There's no doubt in my mind about it. As a band, one of the main things that we all shared in common, is we'd pretty much seen it all and done it twice. Our first policy became, if we don't believe in it, then we don't do it.

We began our journey, yet again, in the middle of nowhere on the backroads of America, playing to what my friend Haggard calls "the forgotten people". The Lakota Tribe on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota were the first people to claim us. We claimed them back and championed them by making a record called *Badlands* and singing out on their behalf.

We then turned our attention to a vanishing style of gospel music that comes from the Mississippi Delta and made a recording in its likeness called *Souls' Chapel*. Alongside these projects I worked to photograph and curate the treasures and artifacts from the Old Testament world of country music and staged them in museums around the country. The mission statement being, country music deserves to be regarded as a profound and meaningful culture that is to be studied, played and considered in the pantheon of the arts, alongside all other classical forms.

As busy as we were from the beginning, I made the statement one day to the Superlatives, "It still doesn't feel like we've found the right place to drive our sword into the ground and stake the claim on our true cause." The journey seemed strange to me at times. I came out guns a blazing trying to go higher but instead I kept sinking deeper, deeper, and deeper, toward the roots of American music. I seemed to fall through corridor after corridor of year's worth of my musical wanderings, explorations, collaborations, hits and misses. I found various strains of merit in most of it. However, the words of Solomon met me right as I seemed to crash onto the rock, where I'd hidden my true heart and soul back in 1973. It was all vanity – nothing but vanity. Lesson learned and from that moment forward, I vowed to never again follow my head but only my heart, wherever it might lead, at whatever the cost.

Where my heart led me was right back to the bosom of traditional country music. The kind that is timeless, beautiful, beyond trend, the empowering force, the reflection of a people and a culture. The kind of country music that the working man and scholars alike call home. George Jones likens it to a religion. My wife, Connie Smith, refers to it as the cry of the heart.

When I reconnected with traditional country music I found myself, my calling. The job seemed to be to champion it, love it, protect it, care for its people, attempt to write a new chapter for it and to make sure that everybody understands that it's alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Upon that revelation, it was then that I better understood why Lester Flatt hired a 13 year old kid, and why J.R. Cash gave me his best guitar. It was part of their assignment to pass it on just as it is mine to pass it along to someone else. I wholeheartedly accepted this mission and I am at total peace inside of it.

The year 1972 when I first came to the quaint old mystical city of Nashville was 40 years ago. Some of it went by fast, some of it went by slow. With the exception of two bad seasons which aren't worth mentioning, I've loved almost every moment of the journey. Twinkle on country star.

So you wanna be a country star? It's a worthy calling but not one for the faint of heart. As the song says, "It's lonely at sundown in Nashville." I know what I'm singing about. So do the Superlatives, Mr. Kenny Lovelace, Gary Carter and Robby Turner who all brought their genius to this project. As did the great Buck Trent, who can tell you everything you need to know about country music life in Music City U.S.A. You cannot name me anyone who has paid a greater price for fame and fortune than the Williams family. One of my loved ones is Hank III. I called him and he came and sang on this record. And I thank him. Consider the first family of country music, the Carter Family. They know about broken and unbroken circles and have endured decades worth of sundowns in Nashville. Lorrie Carter Bennett came and sang on behalf of her family. She knows well the full weight of what she's singing about when she sings the word "pain" on *Song of Sadness*. I love her for bringing her heart to this record.

The main musical difference that I see in now and when I first came to Nashville is, back then it seemed that the most outlaw thing you could possibly do around here was to take country music and blow it up into rock & roll. Mission accomplished! Today the most outlaw thing you can possibly do in Nashville, Tennessee is play country music.

So therefore I say,  
Tear the Woodpile Down.

Marty Stuart  
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