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A few years ago, I was walking along the main highway in Branson, Mo., lost in a flurry of prefab celebrity music theaters. Then, what to my wondering eyes should appear but a quaint shop that featured beautiful hand-carved solid oak swings and rocking chairs.

They were crafted by Bobby "Jingle Bell Rock" Helms.

Helms, 60, has dabbled in wood-crafting most of his life, but he didn't take it seriously until 1984, when he began working in a factory about 100 miles south of his home in Martinsville, near Indianapolis.

He has designed and built desks, gliders, swings, rocking chairs, tables and even solid oak caskets that he sold to a southern Indiana factory for a cool \$10,000.

"They were pretty," Helms said in an interview earlier this week from his home. "We'd put a hard finish to them, they'd be real shiny. Man, you could see yourself. The entertainers in Branson loved the gliders. Ferlin Husky bought one. Mickey Gilley, Moe Bandy. They bought them to sit out on the lake.

Helms was in Branson for only eight months, working with Husky ("Fallen Star," "Country Music Is Here to Stay") at the Cristy Lane Theater.

After he lost sight in his right eye due to an ulcer in 1977, Helms' woodcrafting skills were affected. When he developed asthma in 1993, Helms retired from woodworking because he cannot be around dust.

"Working with wood was a way of relaxing," he said. "I could make a rocking chair in three hours. And I could see pretty good out of my left eye. I never thought about singing. It took me away from all that."

But Helms will never be far removed from "Jingle Bell Rock." In 1957, "Jingle Bell Rock" shot all the way to No. 6 on the Billboard pop charts. It was the followup to his No. 1 hit, "My Special Angel."

"They wanted another record and fast," Helms recalled. "It was coming up December and a songwriter had started 'Jingle Bell Rock.' I added the bridge, 'for the bright time, it's the right time.' If you listen, there's nothing in there actually about Christmas: 'Jingle Bell time is a swell time to go riding in a one-horse sleigh, giddy-up jingle horse . . .' See? It's kind of stupid. But it's got that cheerful beat everybody likes.

"We cut it in 17 minutes. Two takes. The Anita Kerr Singers came in with some arrangements. I cut it at the end of November. Actually, they flew me to Nashville from the Palace Theater in Toronto, where I was working a show with Patsy Cline, Marty Robbins, George Jones and Johnny Horton."

Helms never thought "Jingle Bell Rock" would be a hit. He was worried about adding the "rock" element, especially in 1957, when crooners like Pat Boone and Eddy Arnold slayed commercial pop and country.

Helms was actually discovered by country legend Ernest Tubb, who saw him on the regional TV show "Hayloft Frolic," on WTTV-TV out of Bloomington, Ind., Helms' hometown. Tubb asked the young singer to perform on his "Midnight Jamboree" show in Nashville. Tubb also hooked Helms up with Country Music Hall of Fame producer Paul Cohen, who produced all of Helms' hits.

"Ernest and his Texas Troubadours were in Bloomington, playing at the high school gym," Helms recalled. "He saw me on television and he called the station himself. I couldn't believe it. Two weeks later, I was on the 'Midnight Jamboree.' He liked my singing. He told me it sounded like I had a cold."

Helms is happy that he will always be associated with "Jingle Bell Rock." According to information he gets from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, "Jingle Bell Rock" is second only to "White Christmas" in annual sales of holiday tunes. "I was the first guy to put rock in Christmas," he said. "After that came (the 1960 Brenda Lee hit) 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree,' stuff like that."

"Jingle Bell Rock" has been covered more than 600 times. It also appears on 22 soundtracks, including "Lethal Weapon." "I like Brenda Lee's version of 'Jingle Bell Rock,'" Helms said. "And Randy Travis cut it, he did a good job. I liked Chet Atkins' version. The Monkees didn't do a great job of singing it, but their video was good. People just get a good feeling from that song."