

Oct. 6, 1998-----

NASHVILLE----- Chet Atkins is the world's most universally known guitarist. It can sadden the soul to see him walk slowly into his Music Row office with a wooden cane and a willing heart.

But give him time.

A humble spirit and Tennessee wit will soon fill the room.

Atkins, 74, has spent much of the last year recovering from a stroke and surgery to remove a brain tumor. On a sunny Friday afternoon, he sits behind an old desk and carefully props his cane on the desktop.

Atkins holds up his lean left hand, which flavored the rhythm-guitar parts on Hank Williams' "Jambalaya" and "Your Cheatin' Heart," Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" and "Hound Dog," and the Everly Brothers' "When Will I Be Loved" and "All I Have to Do Is Dream."

Atkins tries to move his left index finger and his left little finger. He is stymied by a higher power. "The fingers on the fretting hand are numb," he says. "A little bit on the right hand, too. It ain't no fun, brother.

"I still try to practice every night, but it hasn't been working too good. I was going to breakfast a couple days ago and I slipped on the pavement, grabbed for a column and missed it. I messed up my thumb. It bothers me because I've got three or four jobs booked."

One of Atkins' most important jobs is serving as the conscience of Music City. He has recorded 75 albums, sold more than 30 million records and is the youngest person to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

It is appropriate that Atkins is the driving force behind the new Columbia Records project "Tribute to Tradition," which features contemporary artists such as Patty Loveless, Randy Travis, the Dixie Chicks and Martina McBride singing classic country songs.

Not surprisingly, Atkins has a role on the record's strongest tracks. Alison Krauss covers "The Three Bells," a French pop ballad Atkins found in 1959 while watching "The Jack Paar Show." It became a hit for the Browns.

And Mary Chapin Carpenter, Mark Knopfler, Vince Gill, Steve Wariner and Atkins collaborate on the edgy Don Gibson chestnut "Oh Lonesome Me." In 1957 Gibson

was unemployed and living in the Shilom Trailer Park, north of Knoxville, Tenn. One afternoon he wrote "Oh Lonesome Me" and "I Can't Stop Loving You" and sent the tape to Atkins at RCA Records in Nashville.

By mid-1958 the double-sided single was No. 1 on the country charts and in the top 10 on the rock charts. "Oh Lonesome Me" is considered the single that gave birth to the Nashville Sound, of which Atkins will always be regarded as the architect.

As an RCA producer, Atkins was the first to remove traditional steel guitar and fiddle from country records. He thought the deep country sound of traditional instrumentation stifled potential for radio airplay. As families migrated to urban centers, country audiences became more sophisticated in their listening habits.

"I'm kind of square," he says with a grin. "If I like something, usually the public will like it. I found that out early on when Steve Sholes turned things over to me." In 1956, Sholes, who was RCA's A&R (artists and repertoire) man, put Atkins in charge of scouting for new talent and producing. Atkins went out and signed Dolly Parton, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson.

"I was wrong a few times, but I was right most of the time," Atkins says in a whisper. "But a good song is a good song. You can't take away from that."

Don Gibson remains a favorite of Atkins'. Besides writing "Oh Lonesome Me," Gibson wrote "Sweet Dreams" for Patsy Cline.

"Don Gibson was one of our best songwriters," Atkins says. "He was. He doesn't write anymore. He's a recluse. He lives out here in a mansion. (Gibson is now 71.) He doesn't want to see anyone. I'm the best friend he's got, and I haven't talked to him in four or five months."

Atkins and Gibson connected with their love of the clean, flashy gypsy jazz of the Hot Club of France. "When I made records with him, the rhythm section would try to make it like the Hot Club of France," Atkins explains. "He'd sing his a-- off. He tried everything. One time, he laid flat on the floor on his back and sang into the microphone. If he had died like Hank Williams did, he would be a legend, too."

Atkins played rhythm guitar behind Williams on such early 1950s hits as "Jambalaya" and "Your Cheatin' Heart." Merle Travis was the first guitar star Atkins emulated. He was impressed by the way Travis used his thumb for rhythm and his index finger for melody at the same time. Atkins improvised on that technique, using two fingers with the thumb to create the fluid "Chet Atkins sound."

Nashville publisher Fred Rose also encouraged Atkins to write with Williams, but Atkins was intimidated. "I was too much in awe of Hank," Atkins says. "I was 24; he was 29. He was a domineering guy. He had all kinds of confidence in himself as a writer and as a singer. We tried to write a couple songs, didn't have much luck."

"President Clinton told me - if I may drop a name - when he was 16 he had a little combo with one of my best friends, Randy Goodrum (former Dottie West producer), down in Hot Springs (Ark.). He said they made an album that had some Hank songs on it, but it didn't sell anything. I said, 'Probably would now, wouldn't it?' He said, 'Yeah, it would.' . . ." Atkins pauses and adds, "especially if you had (Monica) Lewinsky on it."

Across from Atkins' desk is a picture of President Jimmy Carter and Atkins along with black-and-white studio shots of Atkins playing behind Hank Williams and Elvis Presley. But the best photographic memory is a concert snapshot with the inscription "To Chet, With Love, Tipper Gore."

Trouble is, the picture is of the late Carl Perkins.

"She thought he was me," Atkins says, pointing his cane at Perkins. "I wrote her back anyway. I didn't know if she was the kidding type." There also are portraits on the wall of true admirers such as Paul McCartney. "I saw Paul on TV a couple years ago and they asked him about writing 'Michelle,'" Atkins says. "He said he was trying to sound like Chet Atkins. Isn't that nice? He's always good to me when he comes to town."

In 1966 Atkins recorded "Chet Atkins Picks on the Beatles," an album of Fab Four covers, and in 1995 he accompanied Suzy Bogguss on a tender version of "All My Loving" for the country tribute album "Come Together: America Salutes the Beatles." He continues, "I gotta write George (Harrison), too. (Harrison used to play exquisite Atkins-designed guitars). He's got throat cancer. Hell, I've had cancer four or five times, so I have to write him a note of encouragement."

The office becomes quiet. Atkins looks over at a faded beige Fender Amp from the early 1950s. The sweet-sounding amp is speckled with old cigarette burns.

Atkins continues, "It's funny how some people get sick young like that, and other people hold on and get over it real well. Just like I've done."