

Cowboy Jack Cement

By: Dave Hoekstra

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NASHVILLE The cabbie is as slow as fleas falling off a dead dog. But by the time we conclude our country-western cruise here, there's a whole lotta shakin' going on: This city moves to the gaucho groove of the Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa on the near west side.

And the man behind that groove is "Cowboy" Jack Clement, an unconventional underground hero here in Music City.

Among the accomplishments of the 55-year-old Nashville-based songwriter-producer are the pop music incarnations of Johnny Cash and Charley Pride, the plans for a country-western spaceship and the discovery of Jerry Lee Lewis.

As an engineer and a producer, Clement was steering Sun Records in Memphis from muddy rockabilly through light country to raw rock from 1956 to 1959 when Jerry Lee Lewis walked through the door of the studio. "I was doing nothing in the control room and the receptionist comes back and tells me there's a guy here who says he plays piano like Chet Atkins," Clement says. "Well, I was a big Chet Atkins fan. I even had one of his records on the music system at Arthur Murray's (where Clement was then a dance instructor). It wasn't all that danceable, but I made them leave it on there. People were fox-trottin' to Chet Atkins.

"Anyway, he came on back and sure enough, he played like Chet," Clement says. "So I asked him to sing, and he was great, but it was real, real country. I loved it, but the bottom was ready to drop out of country. I asked if he did any rock 'n' roll. He said no, but he would work something up, and he went back to Ferriday, La.

"I had made a tape of the session, anyway, and I played it later for Sam (Phillips, founder and president of Sun Records), and he loved it," Clement says. "He wanted to know why I didn't sign the guy up. I told him I didn't remember anyone empowering me to do anything like that. Three weeks later, Jerry Lee walked back in and said he had learned rock 'n' roll. He sung a song he had written called 'End of the Road.'

"I told him to come back on Thursday, and we would have a band and we'd record it. I had Billy Lee Riley playing guitar, a bassist and a drummer. There was nothing on the record but a (small upright) spinet piano. I had thumbtacks on the hammers and miked it from down under. That's what you heard on 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin On' and 'Crazy Arms' (a then-obscure Ray Price tune) - nothing but the piano and the drums and no bass. Sam was out

of town, and when he came back the next week, I played him the tape that started out with 'Crazy Arms.' He heard Jerry Lee play, he heard the intro and before he got to the voice, he stopped the machine and said, 'I know I can sell that.' Then when he heard the vocals, he said, 'Can I sell that!'

"Jerry Lee was a lot of fun to work with," Clement says. "I was taking him all over town, trying to get him a job with a band. People forget he was a drummer then. What he was doing in Ferriday was playing drums with his left hand and piano with his right. The only other guy in the band was a bass player. That was his act then - it was something."

Clement is credited with contributing to the musical and technical end of Sun Records in the late '50s, while Phillips nurtured the feel. "Awh, whatever I was into, I was wrong," Clement now says. "I was into being cute. I liked playing with the sound, while Sam wanted to hear more beat and more bass. Sometimes that sounded a little crude to me. But I wasn't as much into crudity as I am now. Sam was musical, but his strength was the feel he had for the music."

Clement grew up on the gutsy music of Memphis. Eventually, he took his act to Washington, D.C., for a stint in the service. After his discharge, Clement formed a bluegrass band that barnstormed the East and the South in the early '50s.

"I had planned to go back to Washington, D.C., but I saw some old friends in Memphis, one of which was teaching dance at Arthur Murray," Clement says. "I never had danced a lick in my life, but I had been on the Marine Corps drill team and I had an incredible sense of rhythm. So I went to an Arthur Murray training class, and six weeks later, I had gone from a non-dancer to a dance instructor. And I've been dancing ever since. In fact, when I had a control room window, that's how I used to produce. There's only so many times you can tell somebody, 'That's good, but let's do it again.' If they're really doin' it right, I'm dancing my a- - off."

Clement smiles, gets up from his chair and begins to tango across his office floor. "That lets them know if they sing a little better, I'll dance a little better," he says. "I always go as far as I can and then a little bit beyond."

He is more relaxed these days, working on select projects out of his spacious home-studio. Looking something like the white-haired Skipper from "Gilligan's Island," Clement keeps a close watch over his Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa. Since he built his first Nashville studio in 1969, he has attempted to eliminate the sterility typical of a recording studio by creating a homey and spiritual feel - hence the Cowboy Arms Hotel. Songs ranging from Ray Stevens's "Everything Is Beautiful" to Todd Rundgren's "We

Gotta Get You a Woman" have been cut in Clement's hotel and recording spa, whose waiting room is filled with boxes of master tapes of John Prine's latest album and Johnny Cash gold records like "Ring of Fire."

Clement still is most closely associated with the career of Johnny Cash.

"It's been 30 years last month that I met Johnny Cash," Clement says. "I was just at Sun for two weeks. I was Sam's assistant, and 'I Walk the Line' was still a hit (for Cash). I wrote and played guitar on 'Ballad of a Teenage Queen' (Cash's 1957 follow up hit to 'I Walk the Line'). What I tried to do was add to his music. I did things like add voices. That's how we had to do it back in those days. You could add something; you couldn't take anything away."

In *Sun Records - The Brief History of the Legendary Record Label*, authors Colin Escott and Martin Hawkins quote Phillips as saying, "The best country music in the world was being produced in Nashville . . . but those guys didn't leave enough to the imagination. Can you hear 'I Walk the Line' with steel guitar added to it?"

Clement gave Cash a bit of that imagination, a debt Cash hasn't forgotten. The Johnny Cash and June Carter clan still record with Clement. So do artists like John Prine and John Hartford.

"I'm in the middle of working with sort of a new edition of the Carter Family," Clement says. "It's the three sisters (Helen, June and Anita) who are all daughters of Mother Maybelle, and June's daughter Carlene (the former wife of rock's Nick Lowe), who is singing with them now. It's really a nice sound. We've cut about 20 some Carter Family songs, and next week we're going to cut some original things.

"Johnny Cash has been singing bass with them, and I videotaped them in the studio last week to document the whole affair. The family has been traveling with Johnny Cash, and they've been getting a good response. It seems like folks are ready for a (well-phrased and harmonious) Carter sound again, which pleases me, because I'm very much into something that's not like what I hear on the radio these days. And it really is a new sound because Carlene adds a nice spark to it - a little bit of rock 'n' roll. In turn, that brings out the rock 'n' roll in the rest of them."

Slightly more surprising is Clement's new-found love for polka music. "I just cut a live album with (Grammy-winner) Frankie Yankovic. Actually, what happened is Polygram Records threw a polka party at the Music Row Showcase, and Yankovic came down with three of his musicians. Then we got four of my (country) guys, rehearsed a little bit and had some people singing (including Prine).

"Last year we cut some wonderful polkas with three guys from Frankie's band, and a month later that lead to cutting some more wonderful polkas. It's happy music, and I've been wanting to produce happy music."

Despite his busy recording schedule, Clement hasn't forgotten his dreams of space travel.

"It's a little pet project that if I ever get enough money and momentum going - like getting the first billion and finding a few other people with a billion - then maybe we can build a spaceship," Clement says. "It would be called the Alpha Centauri because that's the closest star to Earth. It's only 3.8 light years away. Technologically, things can happen very fast. I've always called it the 30-year plan, and we're about 15 years into it now."

"And if I don't get to outer space, I wouldn't be the first one not to get to outer space," Clement says. "It's something to think about, and it brings everything together."