

Fred Foster
By Dave Hoekstra
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- You could say Fred Foster has had a monumental life in music. He gave Roy Orbison his biggest break. He recorded soul singers Arthur Alexander and Joe Simon. Foster produced actor Robert Mitchum's hit single "Little Old Wine Drinker Me." He co-wrote "Me and Bobby McGee" with Kris Kristofferson. "Bobby McGee" was for the Monument Records label that Foster founded in 1958. Dolly Parton recorded pop music for Monument in 1966, which led to her being discovered by Porter Wagoner. Sony resurrected the Monument label in 1998, and the first act to sign with the new Monument (which Foster is not involved with) was the Dixie Chicks.

Earlier this year Foster produced Willie Nelson's acclaimed CD "You Don't Know Me: The Songs of Cindy Walker," a tribute to late Texas songwriter Cindy Walker for the Lost Highway label. Now Foster, 75, is returning to Lost Highway on an all-star album with kindred country spirits Nelson, Merle Haggard and Ray Price.

If Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, Nelson and Kris Kristofferson were the Highwaymen, these cats are the Slow Riders.

"This is an event," Foster said over breakfast at the Pancake Pantry. "We redid Harlan Howard's 'Heartaches by the Number,' and Ray sounded better than he did on the original. ... At the end of the sessions, Merle told Willie it was worth the trip just to get a vocal lesson from a master Price. Willie said, 'It always is.'

"Kris was supposed to join us, but he had a conflict. Willie told me the other day that he wants Kris to do some vocals and add him to Kristofferson's 'Why Me?' He'll ultimately be in the final package."

The project due next year, does not yet have a title, but participants have been kicking around Jesse Ashlock's (Bob Wills vocalist-fiddle player) "My Life's Been a Pleasure," which the group covered. They also tackled Floyd Tillman's "I Gotta Have My Baby Back," Leon Payne's "I Love You Because" and Mickey Newbury's "Sweet Memories." Haggard wrote a couple of new songs and Nelson contributed a new composition called "Back to Earth," which he sang as a duet with Haggard.

"Then I said to Willie, you're on Lost Highway Records, why don't

we do Hank Williams' 'Lost Highway?' " Foster said. "So we did."

In a separate interview, Haggard said, "I enjoyed this so much because Fred knows how to climb inside the music."

Foster added, "Well, it all begins with a song. Once in a while a great talent can take an average song and make it a hit -- maybe. But for lasting things, the song has to be there.

"I might have a couple of talents. One is spotting talent in others. Another is setting tempos -- and I don't dance, by the way. When I started Monument, the Arthur Murray dance studio asked for my catalog. I didn't have a catalog. I had only put out four or five records. But they said my tempos were perfect for their dances. They bought records from me, can you imagine that? It has to have feeling. I cannot stand to listen to a sterile recording."

Fred Foster founded the Monument Recording Company (named for the Washington Monument) in 1958. His key investor was Bob Moore, a top Nashville session bassist. Moore's hit Monument singles, such as "Mexico," were precursors for Herb Alpert & the Tijuana Brass.

Moore and song publisher Wesley Rose knew that Roy Orbison was wallowing in obscurity at RCA Records, so Rose brought Orbison to Foster. The Orbison hits suddenly started coming: "Only the Lonely (Know How I Feel)," 1960; "Running Scared," "Crying," 1961; "Dream Baby (How Long Must I Dream)," 1962; "In Dreams," 1963, and so on, all on Monument.

Foster even changed the rock 'n' roll recording process while working with Orbison: He created the first isolation booth.

"Roy was timid. He was tentative. Tense. I couldn't get him above the band, the way I wanted it to sound," Foster said. "I had Gordon Stoker of the Jordanaires sing unison with Roy so I could get him higher. The next session, Roy and I spent a week brainstorming. He had one song I really liked: 'Uptown.' So I called Anita Kerr to see if she could come up with a string section. She found four violins."

Foster asked Kerr to place the players far enough apart in Nashville's RCA Studio B so they would sound like a bigger string section. Saxophonist Boots Randolph was on board to provide color and fills.

"So now we get in the studio," Foster said. "We got a big rhythm

section, four strings, four voices, Boots. And where's Roy? We still couldn't hear him. And when we turned him up to where you could hear him, he was either distorted or the band went over him. So I said to the engineer, 'What if we put Roy over in the corner and pull that coat rack in front of him?' "

Engineer Bill Porter found some blankets in the maintenance room. Orbison was dispatched to a remote corner where he stood behind the blankets. Now the band was far enough away from Orbison's microphone so Foster could work with Orbison's legendary falsetto.

"Chet Atkins came by," Foster said with a smile. "He looked around and said, 'Where's Roy?' I said, 'He's behind that coat rack.' Chet said, 'What for?' And I said, 'I couldn't get him above the band'. Chet laughed and walked away."

Three weeks later Billboard magazine called Foster -- wanting to do a story on his new "isolation booth." Later, Foster and Porter built some dividers on wheels to create American music's first isolation booth. Today, most recordings are made with the singer isolated in such a booth.

Michael McCall, writer-editor at the Country Music Hall of Fame, said, "Fred is one of the most underrated record producers in American history. His Orbison stuff still stands up better than anything recorded in that time. Roy Orbison never would have been the singer he was without that isolation booth. He was too shy. Even now, the Foster-produced Cindy Walker record is the best thing Willie's done in 10 years. And Willie's worked with every producer around. Fred has something that captures a good taste without it sounding like he's trying to be overly tasteful."