

Dec. 15, 1991----

Although he has been forgotten outside devoted honky-tonk circles, **Gary Stewart** is destined to go down as one of the mythical figures of country music.

And how low can you go?

During the early 1980s, **Stewart** was buying Quaaludes in 1,000-lot quart jars. Subsequent overdoses sent the outlaw singer to the hospital three times. In 1985, **Stewart** became addicted to painkillers. Despite all the controversy, big-time acts like Bob Dylan and the Clash had become fans of **Stewart**.

But by 1987, **Stewart** and his longtime wife, Lou, were living in a trailer in Fort Pierce, Fla. Bright portraits of Indian chiefs were hung on the walls. The windows were painted black. A total physical breakdown was on the horizon.

**Stewart** is now rising from the ashes. You pull for him.

In 1988, **Stewart** released "Brand New," his first record in four years for Oakland, Calif., based HighTone Records. **Stewart** did not give interviews; he was unable to tour to promote the album. The record sold just 25,000 units. The 1990 followup, "Battleground," did slightly better.

Now, just in time for Christmas, HighTone has bounced back with "**Gary's** Greatest," a 17-song retrospective of **Stewart's** career. **Stewart's** best-known mid-'70s benders are covered here - "I See the Want to in Your Eyes," "Drinkin' Thing" and "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinking Doubles)."

It's outlaw music in the classic sense - **Stewart's** acrid country-blues phrasing going mano a mano against mighty rock 'n' roll arrangements. He attacks the material with a cocksure growl instead of the self-pity that colors more traditional outlaw songs.

It took a week of calls to track down **Stewart**, who has moved from the trailer back into a house in Fort Pierce. The stories go that **Stewart** can be cantankerous and impatient, but in an hourlong conversation, he was humble and shy. Still, he constantly repeated that he is one of country music's reluctant sons.

"I like a lot more things than just music," he said. "I don't want to dedicate all my time to it. Now I'm collecting Roy Rogers videos. (I) get 'em for \$5.95 down at K-mart. I love (Indian) art and decorating my home. I take stuff out of storage and put it up. The next week, I take stuff down and put it back in storage."

"Music was not my destiny."

**Stewart** was born a coal miner's son on May 28, 1944, in Letcher County, Ky. A Gemini. Waylon Jennings once sang "The Gemini Song (When I'm Bad, I'm Bad)." When he hasn't been good, **Stewart** has pretty much followed that tune.

"When I was young, I used to make guitars out of cardboard and a stick," **Stewart** said. "I'd sit by the old stand-up radios like I was singing. One night, I dreamed I was Hank Snow. I could sing just like him. Then I woke up, and it was Hank singing on the radio."

At age 12, **Stewart** saw Jerry Lee Lewis at a carnival in Jenkins, Ky. The similarities between Lewis' vocals and **Stewart's** wiggly worm-in-the-bottle vibrato would later become clear. Roy Dea, who was Lewis' and Charlie Rich's producer at Mercury records, has produced **Stewart** since 1973. But at age 12, **Stewart** was impressed by Lewis's

frenzied stage show.

"I have adrenalin," **Stewart** said. "Once I start singing, I get this quiver in my throat. I can't fake that. My mother is Indian. My grandfather was Indian. But I look like my father. When my mom used to get mad, she'd chase my dad with a knife and start yelling like an Indian."

**Stewart**'s own crazy stage show, mixed with his drinking material, fed rumors that he could be an inconsistent live act. He peppered lyrics like "I've got this drinking thing/ to keep from thinkin' things" with rubbery legs and a ramblin' midsection.

"I've been accused of being wasted - which I have been a few times," he said. "I'm not saying I'm walking the chalk line, but I am getting a little older. I've lived four or five lives. I got pigeonholed. The drinking stuff is what everybody wanted. But even today, I might go down and get a six-pack, and it might last me a week. I'm just not a big drinker."

These days, **Stewart** does not travel much. He will play a few gigs around Fort Pierce, and occasionally jaunt to the Southwest, where he has a strong following among Navajo Indian tribes.

"I had a physical breakdown about three years ago," he said. "Mostly from car wrecks. I couldn't work the road. After a couple of operations, one leg is about a half-inch shorter than the other. It throws my whole body off. It pinches nerves, and sometimes the pain gets pretty strong. Actually, I was trying to retire, but the money, just wasn't coming in."

While laid up, **Stewart** was buying blues and spiritual records from Down Home Music in El Cerrito, Calif. He became acquainted with Down Home owner Frank Scott, who told **Stewart** about HighTone, the same label that has signed **Dave** Alvin, and earlier had Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Robert Cray on its roster.

Dea flew out to Oakland to speak with HighTone partner Larry Sloven, cautioning that **Stewart** could not travel much. Sloven said the label would take **Stewart** on, regardless of his physical problems.

**Stewart** now is Sloven's favorite country artist. He was signed to what HighTone termed a "several record" deal.

Perhaps what's most remarkable about **Stewart**'s tumultuous life is that his marriage has survived too many bills, pills and thrills.

**Stewart** called out, "Honey, how long we been married?"

A soft echo away from the phone answered, "30 years."

**Stewart** met Mary Lou Taylor at a Florida drive-in. **Stewart** recalled, "She was something like 21 and I was 16. I saw Lou in this car.

"I had seen her a year before in town and she was dancing - and Lord, she could dance. She was pressing on my mind. So I wanted to get in the car and meet Lou. I was going to climb in, and she said, 'Watch it, boy, don't sit on my 45s.' And all over the back seat, there were 45s by Chuck Berry and Jimmy Reed."

Lou, as **Stewart** calls her, partially influenced his bolt out of Nashville in 1971. Mel Tillis had seen **Stewart** at a Florida nightclub and suggested that he move to Music City to write. In just a year, Billy Walker had a hit with **Stewart**'s "She Goes Walkin' Through My Mind" and Jack Green scored with "There's a Whole Lot About a Woman a Man Don't Know."

Then one night, **Stewart** saw the Allman Brothers. "That changed me forever," he said. "I had four songs on the charts that I had written, which is real unusual. But I came into the office on Monday, and I told (then music publisher) Jerry Bradley (the son of Owen Bradley, who also worked with Waylon Jennings) I had seen what I wanted to do,

and I wanted to go back home. He said, `And leave all this?' But that's what I wanted to do.

"I came home and started playing slide guitar. I took a job with some guys who were making \$90 for three nights. We were doing Southern country rock. I was living on food stamps and sold shoes part time."

**Stewart** and Lou also had two kids to support.

**Stewart** took a thoughtful pause for an emotional shuffle.

"I just always wanted to be married to the same woman," he said. "I did not want to leave my family. A lot of times, it takes that to be a big star."

You pull for him to shake off the stardust.

POSTSCRIPT: On November 26, 2003--Thanksgiving Eve---Mary Lou died of pneumonia. Stewart, who had been scheduled to play Billy Bob's three days later, canceled his gigs. His friends later told reporters that he was despondent after Mary Lou's death. On December 16, 2003 his daughter's boyfriend and Stewart's close friend, Bill Hardman visited Stewart's Fort Pierce, Florida, home to check on him.

They found Stewart dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the neck.

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