March 27, 1988-----

COLUMBUS, Ohio The heart is a piston that pulses through time, with absolute disregard to rearview mirrors, speed traps and road maps. Interstate 70 drives into central Ohio, where the state line is marked by a gaudy aquamarine arch that proclaims:

"Ohio Welcomes You to the Heart of It All."

That is why Ohio is a great place to see country legend George Jones. Things don't change much here. Woody Hayes is still a noble bet and a diner is still a chef-o-nette. You are in a state of authenticity, where the heart bleeds in George Jones blue.

Jones sings from the most cobwebbed corners of his heart. His textured voice displays tension, with his still authoritative range running like a railroad train between a deep honky-tonk willow and a state of satiety.

Sharing the bill with Conway Twitty at the antiquated Veteran's Memorial Stadium here, Jones closed his 50-minute set with a moving duet of "Amazing Grace," sung with his latest discovery, a 19-year-old country singer named Shelby Lynne. As Jones reached the resounding high notes of the gospel standard, it was immediately evident what truth means to the singer.

The 56-year-old Jones - once notorious for not showing up for concerts, let alone giving interviews - offered a rare glimpse into his musical past during a conversation in his tour bus after the show.

"I never played guitar until church, although when I was very young, I sung around the house," said Jones, at a tiny kitchen table, looking me at eye to eye. "My Sunday school teacher taught me my first chords on a guitar. I would go with Sister Annie and Brother Berle Stevens into this little town called Kuntz, Texas. Every Saturday afternoon, we'd sing inside the car with loudspeakers on the outside. Sister Annie would play guitar and I'd sing harmony with her or she'd sing harmony with me.

"My mother was very religious and played the organ and piano in church when she was young," Jones continued. "My dad played a little square-dancin' guitar, but he was the wilder side of the family, you know."

George Washington Jones Sr. was a hard-living truck driver and a pipe fitter who settled in the rural "Big Thicket" region near Beaumont, Texas.

His wife, Clara, was a country contradiction: a Pentecostal who often shielded young George and his six brothers and sisters from the fallout of their father's drinking binges.

But it was the magnet of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry most traditional stars - Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell and, most of all, Hank Williams Sr. - that tugged at the Texas heart of George Jones.

"We had an afternoon radio show (on KRIC in Beaumont), and Hank came to town (in 1949) to work," Jones recalled. "He sat and talked with us like he knew us his whole life. I worshipped him. I couldn't wait for his records to come out. His style was all in the feeling. He could sing anything and it would make you sad, but an uptempo thing could make you happy."

The story goes that Williams performed "Wedding Bells" over KRIC with Eddie and Pearl, the husband-and-wife house band that featured an excitable 18-year-old George Jones on electric guitar. Jones was so hyper about playing behind Hank that he never hit a note.

Jones's glorious new album for Epic Records, "Too Wild Too Long," features a hot cover of Hank's "I'm a Long Gone Daddy." The album rings of personal redemption, ranging from Keith Stegall and Jim McBride's ballad, "I'm a Survivor," to the album's weepy title song, written by Nashville's Troy Seals and Eddie Setser:

"I've still got this problem

with just four little walls

and just one look should tell you

that I haven't changed at all.

I've been running too wild too long

There's still a place inside my heart where no one's ever gone."

Jones's Columbus set was light on the new material. Instead, it focused on the songs the older fans came to hear: "The Race Is On," "Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes?," "Tennessee Whiskey" and "He Stopped Lovin' Her Today."

"O-hi-o is one of the best country music states we work," Jones said in a rich drawl. "I've been coming up here for years and they've always been the same. And they're very appreciative of the music."

Jones's appearance was properly regal and his voice resonated splendidly. He punctuated his songs with his playful country flutter, downcasting vocal lines for

drama immediately before climbing the scale. This is what emphasizes the tension in the "shoooooes" of "Who's Gonna Fill Their Shoes?" and the "rosessss" in "Wine-Colored Roses." Jones wore a black Western coat over a white ruffled shirt and jet black slacks. His white cowboy boots were as pointed as his opinions.

It was vintage George Jones, pure and easy.

As a point of contrast, I brought up Thumper Jones. With the successful rising of Sun Records out of Memphis in 1955, Jones's first label (Starday, out of Beaumont) decided to join the rockabilly jive. Only a year earlier Jones had recorded fiddle-heavy country hits such as "Why Baby Why" and "Uh Uh No." What followed were raw rockabilly singles such as "Rock It" and his own "Heartbreak Hotel" recorded under the pseudonym Thumper Jones so traditional country fans wouldn't get upset.

Jones laughed at the sound of those memories.

"I started off in the early '50s, which was a bad time," he said. "At that time very few stations played country music. We always listened to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday night. Rock was so strong all through the '50s before it cooled in the early '60s. I did a couple of (rockabilly) things for those all-night radio packages. I needed the extra money because we were pretty hungry back in those days.

"But I feel bad about it nowadays," he said with a laugh. "I feel bad because I love country music so much. I tried to buy up all the old (Starday) masters so people couldn't hear them anymore. It was such a bad sound."

I asked him to describe the rudimentary ambiance of Starday Studios.

"Oh, yes, they had a living room and a front bedroom and what they did was put a glass through the two rooms," he recalled in satisfied tones. "They put egg crates on the wall to help their sound and keep out the noise of the trucks going by outside. That was where I recorded a lot of my first things (before the Thumper Jones experiment). And when you listen to them today, you can really tell it."

Despite the distance he has since put between himself and rockabilly, Jones said collaborations with rock 'n' roll artists are on the horizon. Los Lobos and Huey Lewis both have approached Jones about recording together. (A deal with John Cougar Mellencamp fell through, Jones said.)

"They're going to do it country and they want to do it country," he said with traditional Jones command. "And, naturally, that is the only way I'd want to do it. I can't imagine doing it any other way. Country fans would disown me. In the first place, I sure can't sing it (rock 'n' roll). In the second place, I sure wouldn't want to sing it, and in the third place, I love country music too much. Now, sometimes I like to clown around with rockabilly beats, but only if the song is there. Me and Johnny

Paycheck did a '50s album (`Double Trouble,' released in 1980). To me, that was rock 'n' roll - Little Richard, Chuck Berry. Not what you hear nowadays."

While "Double Trouble" is difficult to find, you can still stumble across "Rockin' the Country," a 1985 Mercury Records compilation of Jones rockabilly cuts mastered between 1958 and 1961 for Mercury. The album features the original version of "White Lighting," along with elementary wham-bam novelty numbers such as "Who Shot Sam" and "Revenooer Man."

The music is a compelling timepiece as Jones attempts to stake out the void created by Elvis Presley's induction into the Army and Jerry Lee Lewis's infatuation with America's youth . He said, "Elvis did a few things I liked. But I simply wanted to hear Hank Williams Sr. and pure country music.

"They used to call me hardcore (country) and I never did like that,. Because that (hardcore) goes way back up in the hills somewhere where you wear overalls. It took years to live down the word `hillbilly.' I know somebody comes around here lately and calls himself a hillbilly (Steve Earle and/or Dwight Yoakam, perhaps?), but I won't mention no names. It took country music years to get rid of that. We were trying to get people to like country music, and it took people a while because they thought we were tobacco spittin', overall wearin' and not educated very well.

"But we've had enough education."

A great deal of Jones's comeback can be attributed to his fourth wife, Nancy Sepulveda Jones, 38, whom he married in 1983. During the Columbus set, Nancy Jones sat stage left, watching her husband work. As he polished off the notes of "She's the Rock," Nancy Jones smiled, and thrust her left fist into the air with innocent jubilation. Between songs, she (with a little pride) talked about how George had recently put on 10 pounds and how he was grumbling about becoming a "fat old man." And between sets, she was in the front lobby, supervising the sale of George Jones sweatshirts and records.

Jones's comeback is so complete, he even has been booked as a mid-April headliner on the cruise ship Norway.

"I met George eight years ago (at a George Jones concert in upstate New York) through a girlfriend of mine that was dating one of his ex-managers," she said by the souvenir stand. "We just hit it off. I'd heard of his music, but I wasn't that wrapped up in his music until now. What I saw was a person that, I guess, has been mistreated."

Jones's "ragged but right" reputation has often shadowed his music.

In 1974, country singer Tammy Wynette divorced Jones after seven years of marriage (for the details, read her autobiography, Stand By Your Man). In 1979,

after missing 54 concerts, he filed for bankruptcy and checked himself into a hospital. He attempted to dry out again in 1982 in a Birmingham, Ala., hospital and in 1983, he was arrested in Mississippi for cocaine possession and public intoxication. The next day, he flipped his car and nearly killed himself. His weight had dropped from 160 to 100 pounds. Even Texas singer-songwriter Ray Wylie Hubbard tried to sing some sense into Jones by writing the tune, "George, Put Down That Drink."

That's one long, tall paragraph.

Jones doesn't talk about the dark days anymore, and anyway, all anyone needs to do is harmonize the hollow despair of his songs with the deep lines in his face: "If Drinkin' Don't Kill Me, Her Memory Will," "These Days (I Barely Get By)," "A Drunk Can't Be a Man" and his June, 1974, swan song with Tammy, "We Loved It Away."

What has Nancy Jones's unconditional support meant to George Jones?

"I think we're a twosome," she said after a thoughtful pause. "I think George can feel it when I'm not there. It's a husband-and-wife team together. When I'm there, I give him the support, and he feels it because he's so shy. He still gets the stage fright. He's real shy and he's sweet.

"He's got a heart as big as Dixie."