

Obituary of Buck Owens: March 27, 2006

By: Dave Hoekstra

Buck Owens was more than a voice in country music. He was an American metaphor for the clarion of possibility after The Grapes of Wrath migration to California. Alvin Edgar "Buck" Owens was a honky-tonk singer, a TV star -- best known for his role in "Hee-Haw" -- and an entrepreneur who owned radio and television stations in Bakersfield, Calif.

He was a good soul, one who would fly from Bakersfield to Portland, Ore., as he did in March 2005 to surprise compatriot Merle Haggard, who was opening for Bob Dylan. The depth of the moment was understood. With Mr. Owens standing stage right in a resplendent brown and black cowboy jacket, Dylan took a chance on Haggard's "Sing Me Back Home."

Mr. Owens died Saturday at home in Bakersfield. He was 76. On Sunday, CMT.com reported the cause of death as a heart attack.

He grew old, but his songs never became tired. In recent years he stopped touring outside of California, but he still managed to capture a new generation of fans that included Dwight Yoakam, Steve Earle and the Bottle Rockets. In the late 1990s, John Soss of Chicago's Jam Productions held an annual Buck Owens birthday party at Schubas that featured artists as diverse as soul singers Otis Clay and Mavis Staples, and country-rocker Jon Langford.

Mr. Owens crossed borders he never would have dreamed of as a child when he headed west with his sharecropper parents from the Red River Valley near Sherman, Texas. The Beatles had a hit with his "Act Naturally." Ray Charles crossed over big time with Mr. Owens' "Crying Time." Tex Mex legend Flaco Jimenez played with Yoakam and Mr. Owens on their hit "Streets of Bakersfield." You could waltz across Texas to Buck Owens and the Buckaroos. And dancing never goes out of style.

"Being from Texas and by being part of The Grapes of Wrath migration to California, I was accustomed to dance," Mr. Owens told me in 1988. "I was very influenced by Bob Wills and Spade Cooley in the early days because people wanted to dance. I remember getting letters from people who said since I put a little tom-tom steady drum rhythm on my records they weren't going to buy them anymore. But I felt that's what I needed for my songs."

Mr. Owens never performed without drums. Even when he debuted on the drum-free Grand Ole Opry in 1960, he was able to negotiate a snare drum with brushes -- but without a microphone. No wonder Beatles drummer Ringo Starr

sang lead on "Act Naturally."

Last year, roots singer Dave Alvin told me, "In a lot of those Bakersfield records they were listening to how the drummer played the light cymbal on Ray Charles' 'What I'd Say.' Those Bakersfield guys took that same beat and put it into country music. It was about dancing, where Nashville stuff was not about dancing. In the East you had to dance with appropriate space in between people. But once you got to California or Arizona a lot of those mores were gone, and you could do the buckle polishing or the rock 'n' roll dancing."

The Owens family left Texas for Phoenix, where Buck lived until he was 22. He then moved to Bakersfield to form his first band, the Schoolhouse Playboys. Mr. Owens played saxophone and trumpet as the Playboys held court for oil-field rowdies and Okie migrants at the Blackboard Lounge in Bakersfield. (The posted house rule: "Don't Stop Playing When a Fight Breaks Out.") The Playboys songbook included appropriately frenzied Chuck Berry and Little Richard covers.

While wandering around Bakersfield in 1951, Mr. Owens picked up a used Fender Telecaster for \$35, a guitar created three years earlier by Leo Fender. Owens' Telecaster became a trailblazer. After hearing Mr. Owens' raw, earthy sound, Haggard's lead guitarist Roy Nichols also bought a Telecaster. In 1968, Mr. Owens shocked country music again by deploying late guitarist's Don Rich's fuzz tone rock guitar on "Who's Gonna Mow Your Grass."

Mr. Owens always bucked the system. He and other Bakersfield legends, such as Haggard and Red Simpson, created an expressive style by experimenting with jazz and rhythm-and-blues outside Nashville's commercial constraints .

"Buck and I are from the same town," Haggard said in an interview Saturday night. "We've been in many battles together, always on the same side. When I played bass for Buck we didn't have a band name and Buck asked us what we should call ourselves. I shouted out, 'The Buckaroos!' -- and that's the name that stuck. Over the last few years, we became closer than we ever realized. He even flew out to Portland to see me with Dylan. We were outlaws together."

They were such outlaws that in 1965 Haggard married Mr. Owens' former wife, Bonnie. They divorced in 1978, although Bonnie Owens remained a backing vocalist in Haggard's band for years.

Mr. Owens and Haggard had their biggest successes at Capitol Records, under the liberating hand of producer Ken Nelson, a Chicago native. Mr. Owens was signed to Capitol in 1958 and by 1959, his first hit, the swaggering "Second

Fiddle," had cracked the top 40. His other Capitol hits included "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail," "Mental Cruelty" and "Excuse Me (I Think I've Got a Heartache)," popularized in 1992 by the Mavericks. Mr. Owens had 19 consecutive No. 1 hits between 1963 and 1967. Early in his Capitol career, he also played on sessions for artists as diverse as Gene Vincent, Tommy Sands and Stan Freberg.

Mr. Owens believed he never got his props because he was so closely associated with the cornball TV show "Hee Haw," which he co-hosted with Roy Clark between 1969 and 1986. Several years ago, Mr. Owens told me, "They were paying me around \$400,000 a year, but I wondered about the emotional side of that product. People see you every week. You become a household name. I started to see my record sales suffer. Would I do it again? ... Possibly."

Mr. Owens was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1996. That year, he opened his resplendent Crystal Palace entertainment complex in Bakersfield, where Garth Brooks proposed to Trisha Yearwood. It was an appropriate setting. Buck Owens is as timeless as wedding proposals and cowboy hats. He never lost the beat as it played from the heart to the oil fields of Bakersfield.