

Sept. 20, 1996--

Michael Brewer and Tom Shipley were just a couple of low-key troubadours until the fall of 1970. After a gig in a funky Kansas City, Mo., coffeehouse, Shipley walked backstage, sat down and started strumming his guitar.

"I looked up and said, 'Jeezus, Michael, I'm one toke over the line,' " Shipley recalled last week from his home in Rolla, Mo.

(The Merriam-Webster Concise School and Office Dictionary defines "toke" as "a puff on a marijuana cigarette.") "We literally broke into song at that point, sort of simultaneously. We were just entertaining one another. We were just kidding."

It's been high times ever since.

The cheery "One Toke Over the Line" is celebrating its 25th anniversary as a Top 10 hit. It's been covered by artists as diverse as Lawrence Welk and the Grateful Dead. Playing acoustically, Brewer and Shipley make their first area appearance in more than 20 years tonight in Deerfield, a couple tokes north of Chicago.

After the backstage improvisation, Brewer and Shipley played "One Toke" for a couple of friends, but the song didn't take off until they tossed it in as an encore in early 1971 when they appeared with folk singer Melanie at Carnegie Hall.

"I think we were out of songs," Shipley said. "I can't remember. It was like 240,000 tokes ago. The president of our record company (Kama Sutra) was there and he said, 'That's a single.' So Michael and I went in the studio and included it on our next album, 'Tarkio.' We went on tour in Florida and when we came back we found out not only did we have a hit record, but we were in a lot of trouble."

Vice President Spiro T. Agnew singled out Brewer and Shipley as being "subversive" to America's youth for "One Toke Over the Line" - at the same time Welk was featuring the instrumental version of the song on his television show.

"Really, we were just goffin'," said Shipley, 55. "We had a hard time taking it all seriously."

The reality check came later in 1971 in Chicago, when Brewer and Shipley played Richard Harding's Quiet Knight music room. The National Association of Broadcasters convention was in town. Because of that, the Federal Communications Commission was also in town.

"It was one of the last times we played Chicago," Shipley said. "Stations were beginning to drop the song because of what Vice President Agnew said. So everybody comes down to see us. The place is packed: heavy-duty radio guys and

some of the FCC, including the head of the FCC (Nicholas Johnson). So I dedicated 'One Toke' to him. Afterward he came backstage with all these broadcasters and he's wantin' to be our buddy, claiming his comments were taken out of context."

Shipley admits the idea of a "One Toke" followup has floated across his mind.

"Michael and I have talked about doing a reggae version," he said. "I'm serious. Except we'd put it in past tense, 'I must have been one toke over the line/I think I was one toke over the line. . . .' We like doing reggae, but you have to understand we're a couple of white guys living south of (Interstate 44) in the middle of the Ozarks."

Today Shipley is a television producer-director in Rolla, halfway between St. Louis and Springfield, Mo. He also founded the Oral History of the Ozarks Project, a non-profit organization producing documentaries about life in the Missouri Ozarks.

Brewer lives in Branson, Mo., south of Springfield. "He lives there by accident," Shipley chuckled. "He moved to Branson before it became Branson. He moved from outside of Tulsa because there was an emerging music scene here for people who didn't want to go to Nashville or L.A. Mostly pickers and a couple of studios. Then a couple years later, ka boom! He actually likes to say he lives in Hollister (outside of Branson), which he legally does."

The duo reunited in 1986 when a Kansas City, Mo., radio station approached them about a reunion concert. Brewer and Shipley sold out 10,000 tickets in three days. One of their first new projects together was the 1989 soundtrack for one of Shipley's PBS documentaries, "Treehouse - An Ozark Story," about an Ozark mountain man who lived in a tree house.

In 1992 Brewer and Shipley also dipped into the Springfield, Mo., music pool to recruit the world's greatest rock 'n' roll band, the Skeletons, to play on their most recent album, the folk-rock tinged "Shanghai" .

"Around 1975 Donnie Thompson (Skeletons guitarist) and Lloyd Hicks (Skeletons drummer, now working with Dave Alvin) used to be in our band," Shipley said. "When I moved from Kansas City to Rolla, there was a funky little bar in town called the Pub Mobile. They had a cover band with Donnie, (Skeletons bassist-vocalist) Lou (Whitney) and Lou's wife at the time, Merri Lee. They were called Merri Lee and Guys. . . . When Michael and I decided to put together a band, we got those guys."

Whew. What a long strange trip it's been.