

Nov. 15, 1992----

The Grand Ole Opry is the country's longest-running live music and variety radio program. It's fitting that one of country music's longest-running live wires will represent the Opry when it is inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame on Sunday at the Museum of Broadcast Communications in Chicago.

Country singer Porter Wagoner will make a rare stop in Chicago to accept the honors from special guests the Oak Ridge Boys, along with new inductees Don Ameche, "Top 40 Countdown" poobah Casey Kasem, Detroit morning personality J.P. McCarthy and ABC broadcast legend Leonard Goldenson. The program will be broadcast live on WGN-AM and be beamed back to Nashville on WSM-AM, where the Grand Ole Opry was born on Nov. 28, 1925, as "The WSM Barn Dance."

Wagoner is from a different era of country music.

He first appeared at the Opry in 1957, when he sang his hit "Satisfied Mind" at the old Ryman Auditorium in downtown Nashville. Country music was characterized by a spunky self-reliance, found in the topical breadth of its songs as well as the colorful showmanship of its singers.

Few were as colorful as Porter Wagoner:

He was one of the first country artists to exploit the broadcast industry. As early as 1951, he appeared on radio with "The Ozark Jubilee," broadcast from KWTO-AM in Springfield, Mo. While at KWTO, Wagoner met Radio Hall of Famer Paul Harvey, who will host Sunday's ceremony. And from 1960 to 1980, Wagoner reached a television audience of up to 45 million with his syndicated "Porter Wagoner Show."

One of Wagoner's key sponsors was the Chattanooga Medicine Co., a pharmaceutical outfit that sold Soltice heat rubs, hygienic supplies and Black Draught laxative, promoted as "the fastest-moving product in the South."

The permanently pompadoured Wagoner introduced the rhinestone Nudie suit. "It was Nudie's idea," Wagoner said of the Hollywood designer. "He had made clothes for (country singer) Hank Snow, but none with rhinestones or sequins. He told me he wanted to make me a suit that was different than anything anybody had ever worn. Six weeks later, I got a package from him in the mail. It was a beautiful peach-colored rhinestone suit full of wagon wheels and covered wagons."

Wagoner debuted the suit onstage at the Jewell Theater in Springfield, Mo., when he sang his 1953 hit "Company's Comin'." The Portmeister still owns 56 Nudie suits.

In 1979, Wagoner asked James Brown to appear at the Opry.

The Godfather of Soul accepted the invitation and did a medley of Hank Williams tunes ("You Win Again," "Your Cheatin' Heart," "Jambalaya"), along with "Georgia on My Mind" and "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag." Wagoner said,

"I wanted do something for the Grand Ole Opry that would cause a lot of attention. It certainly accomplished that."

When host Roy Acuff returned to the stage, he said, "The greater part of 4,400 people must have felt that Moses had arrived to deliver them from the Egyptians." But that didn't discourage Wagoner. "James was the greatest entertainer I had ever seen," he said. "He was real excited. It was a great night for the Opry."

And what's most overlooked is Wagoner's total lack of limitations when singing country music. His left-field hits have included Freddie Hart's 1965 tune about the homeless, "Skid Row Joe"; his own searing gospel ballad "Pastors Absent on Vacation," which he recorded with the Blackwood Brothers, and even 1971's "The Rubber Room," which he wrote about a nervous breakdown. These songs were a perfect match for Wagoner's tense tenor.

"Actually, I was not trying to write a song about that," he said. "Just for something different, I had pitched a tent inside a room of my house. The tent had no furniture in it. I just put a bunch of mirrors and pillows in there and used it as a writing room. So one day, I was in the tent and wrote a song called 'Anyplace You Want To Go.' It was about a room where you could close your eyes and imagine you were anywhere. Then, for some reason, I wandered off and started writing the song about a man who went crazy in a rubber room and he could hear his friend down the hall, hitting the walls and screaming his wife's name in vain."

You won't hear Garth Brooks tell a story like that.

Of course, country was less sophisticated in Wagoner's era, but the flip side was that an artist had more individual freedom.

"It was a golden time for country music," Wagoner said. "You could write whatever you felt like. For example, Chet Atkins loved 'The Rubber Room.' He didn't think it was a great country song, but he thought it was entirely original. He thought it would be a great rock song."

At age 62, Wagoner is now of a satisfied mind. He reconciled with his old partner Dolly Parton, with whom he sang between 1968 and 1975. In 1979, Wagoner sued Parton for \$3 million in management fees and royalties, but by late 1990, Wagoner and Parton sang together at her Dollywood amusement park. He recently published his colorful autobiography, *A Satisfied Mind* (Rutledge Hill Press).

Wagoner remains a proud fixture at the Grand Ole Opry, which has its roots in the

Ozarks near his native West Plains, Mo. Former Memphis Commercial Appeal reporter and original Opry announcer George D. Hay was covering a funeral at Mammoth Springs, Ark. He was invited to an all-night jam session and was so mesmerized by the atmosphere, he set out to bring it to radio. Hay went on to create the "National Barn Dance" radio show in Chicago, which preceded the birth of the Opry by one year.

Wagoner performs every Friday and Saturday at the Opry, and spent this summer as an official ambassador at the Opryland theme park. (His only 1992 concert appearance outside Nashville was at Mt. Fuji in Japan.) Wagoner clearly recalls his debut at the Opry, when hard country singer Carl Smith introduced him (Wagoner wrote Smith's 1955 hit "Trademark.")

"I was real nervous," Wagoner said. "The Opry is a thing every country music person who's ever been in the business would love to be a member of. My mama said that when I was 8 years old, I would go out in the yard where we had a big tree stump. I'd use that for a stage and play out there for several hours. I'd get up on that stump and introduce my special guest: `Tonight at the Grand Ole Opry, Roy Acuff and the Smoky Mountain Boys.' I'd jump off the stump and get up on the other side start singing (Acuff's) `The Wabash Cannonball.' Then I'd introduce Ernest Tubb as my special guest.

"Finally, when it got to be my turn, I'd just get up and say, `Thank you, Porter, and I'm glad to be with you here tonight at the Grand Ole Opry. . . .'"