

*Throughout my career I enjoyed chasing down behind-the-scenes figures like producer Ken Nelson, a cornerstone of country-western music. I'm happy he lived to see his induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame.*

Nov. 30, 1997

SOMIS, Calif. Legendary Capitol Records producer Ken Nelson was an upstart Chicago radio announcer when he got married in 1945. Nelson and his wife June lived near densely populated 78th and Yates. Every window of their tiny apartment faced big brick walls. The only way out was up.

Nelson made a promise to his new bride:

A home with a view.

Today the 87-year-old Nelson lives in tranquil splendor. In 1972 Nelson and June built a spacious five-room home where every window overlooks the Pacific Ocean and Ventura County. June died in 1984. He still misses her.

Staring alone at an autumn California twilight, Nelson reflects on a mountain of tremendous music. He brought Merle Haggard, Buck Owens, Rose Maddox, Wynn Stewart, Red Simpson and other Southern California country music legends to Capitol Records/Hollywood.

Ken Nelson has recorded more than 100 No. 1 hits. He's produced more than 170 artists, including rockabilly great Gene Vincent, Wanda Jackson, the Louvin Brothers, Tex Ritter and Glen Campbell. Nelson should be in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Plain and simple. Just like his style.

"The problem is I never associated with anyone in Nashville," Nelson says during a warm conversation in his living room. "I did my job and got the heck out of there. Of course, today, my generation is gone. No one knows me."

Ed Benson, executive director of the Country Music Association in Nashville, says, "Ken Nelson is one of the more notable pioneers in the music industry and continues to be nominated for the Hall of Fame. He has a better chance this year, because this is one of those every three years where we induct a non-performer. This could well be his year."

Nelson says, "The only thing I get a little aggravated about is that I was one of the founders of the Country Music Association. I was on the board for many years. I was twice the president (1961, 1962). The only reason I would like to go in (the Hall) is because of my three grandkids.

"I think they'd get a kick out of it."

*Ken Nelson was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 2001. He died at his Somis home in 2008.*

Ken Nelson was born in Caledonia, Minn., but reared at the Home of the Friendless, 51st and South Park in Chicago. "It was an orphan asylum and a place where mothers could put their children," Nelson says. "Mother took me out of there (when I) was 8. I think she paid \$6 a week for me to be there."

Nelson got his first break in the music business while wandering around the old White City Amusement Park, 60th and South Park. He was 13 years old when he saw a rickety stand in front of the Noah's Ark fun house. Chicago music publisher Walter Melrose was peddling sheet music, kazoos and ukuleles.

"One night I leaned over where a guy named Marty Bloom was playing piano," Nelson recalls. "And I started to sing. He says, 'Kid, you got a good voice, come over here.' He put me on a piano stool, wrote some lyrics and stuck a megaphone on my head. Then I sang through the megaphone. The song was (the 1921 hit) 'The Shiek of Araby,' but he had written lyrics to and Nelson sings): 'I'm the sweep of Kankakee/this broom belongs to me/at night when you're asleep/I sweep and sweep and sweep . . ." Nelson stops.

The big room falls quiet, dusted by memories.

Walter and Lester Melrose were brothers who operated a music publishing store across the street from the old Tivoli Theater, 63rd and Cottage Grove. Walter hired Nelson to work in his store after school and on Saturdays. Nelson delivered music to Louis Armstrong at the Sunset Cafe at 35th and Calumet.

"And my customers included (piano player) Jelly Roll Morton and (trumpet player) King Oliver," he says. "Whenever they came in, they'd take me to the corner drug store and buy me a soda. King Oliver was a massive man; he had a bulging eye, and Jelly Roll had two gold teeth in front with diamonds in

them." Nelson smiles and shifts his upper lip to the heavens. He looks like he's talking to a dentist. "I remember them so vividly," he says. "Because they were so warm."

Nelson launched his career as a broadcaster in 1934 at the now-defunct WAAF-AM, originally located in the Stockyards. Regarded as the first licensed station in Chicago, when WAAF began operations, all they broadcast were stock reports.

"Because of the stocks, we had country records," Nelson says. "That was my initiation with country music." In 1940 Nelson became musical director at WJJD. He was announcer for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He coordinated the music for "Suppertime Frolic," a live country music show on WJJD. "We had Bob Atcher, Uncle Henry's Kentucky Mountaineers and a guy named Rhubarb Red," Nelson says. "Who was really (guitar legend) Les Paul."

Lee Gillette was one of Nelson's music publishing cronies who formed a popular trio called the Campus Kids. Nelson played banjo in the trio between 1932 and 1934 before leaving the group to pursue his announcing career.

The Campus Kids, meanwhile, followed radio comedy stars Fibber McGee and Molly to the west coast. Their programs were recorded by Glen Wallich, the founder of the Music City record store at Sunset and Vine in Hollywood. In 1942, Wallich and songwriters Johnny Mercer and Buddy DeSylva founded Capitol Records. (And Gillette went on to produce Capitol vocalists like Nat King Cole, Kay Starr and Stan Kenton.)

Gillette brought Nelson to Capitol. Nelson's first hit was the 1948 Dinning Sisters smash "Button and Bows." Later that year, Gillette was named head of the Capitol pop department and Nelson took over the country division. Nelson and June left Chicago for Studio City, Calif.

"I appreciate all kinds of music," says Nelson, who retired from Capitol in 1975. "I wasn't necessarily a country fan. I'm still not what you call a country fan." In the mid-1950s Nelson embraced rock 'n' roll, a rarity for someone in the recording business.

Nelson is sitting on a long sofa. A black piano stands behind him. The sheet music on the piano is Beethoven's "Für Elise." At age 87, Nelson is learning how to play the classics. "I always wanted to play piano when I was a kid," Nelson says. "I played tenor banjo. We didn't have a piano. So I said, 'Before I

kick the bucket, I'm going to play the piano.' "

And Nelson didn't learn how to drive a car until 1961, at age 50.

Nelson was so good at finding talent because he took buses and trains to hear young country artists in the small towns where they performed. Nelson kept his ear close to the ground.

"I'd stop off at bus stations and walk into diners and saloons where they were playing country music," Nelson says. "I'd get the feel of it. I'd look for things that connected with me. The main thing in a song is a story. The melody should be singable to the average person. And the emotion, of course."

Adventure is the gift Nelson neglected to mention. He still carries the open spirit of wanderlust, whether it is listening to music, playing piano or seeing the world. "After my wife passed away, my daughter (Claudia) and I went to China," Nelson says. "And Russia. Siberia. Mongolia. Hong Kong. Singapore. Now we're going to Australia."

One of Nelson's most worldly artists was Buck Owens, whom he signed in 1957 after hearing him deliver the twangy Fender Telecaster behind gritty Bakersfield, Calif., vocalist Tommy Collins.

"Buck had a great style on the guitar," Nelson says. "We had an opening thing we did on all of Tommy's records, where you immediately knew it was Tommy Collins. Buck always says he was going to go to Columbia Records, which is the reason I signed him. That absolutely is not the reason."

"Buck kept bugging me about how he wanted to sing, how he wanted to audition. So one day after a session, I said, 'OK, go ahead and sing.' I heard about 16 bars and said, 'That's enough!' He came in the booth and thought I turned him down. But I heard it right away. He had it."

Owens and Nelson keep in touch. Once or twice a year, Nelson drives his car through the southern San Joaquin Valley to visit Owens in Bakersfield. Owens says, "Ken Nelson was one of the smartest men in the music business. He found artists who wrote their own songs, had their own bands, and knew what they wanted to do. Then he sat back and doodled (on a scratch pad in the studio) and let them do it. There is no doubt that Ken Nelson should be in the Country Music Hall of Fame." Furthermore, Buck's ex-wife Bonnie, now a backing vocalist with another ex-husband, Merle Haggard, nominates Nelson every year.

Nelson discovered Haggard in 1963 when he traveled to Bakersfield to record a 10th anniversary live album for disc jockey/comedian Herbert "Cousin Herb" Henson's television show, which reigned supreme on television station KERO in the late 1950s.

Haggard was a guitarist in Henson's back-up band. Nelson loved Haggard. "I asked him if he'd like to sign to Capitol," Nelson says. "And Merle just said, 'No.' I said, 'Why not?' He said Lou Tally and Fuzzy Owen gave him his first break on (the regional) Tally records and he was going to stick with them. I respected him for that."

Nelson recognized Haggard's chart action with the Tally material. He told Owen it would be behoove Haggard to go to Capitol because of the company's sophisticated marketing and distribution plans. Owen agreed to sell Nelson all of Haggard's Tally masters. The result launched Haggard's 25-year career at Capitol, which produced 38 No. 1 songs.

Nelson always respected his artist. Extremely mild-mannered, he was still able to shoo songwriters and other outsiders away from the studio. Nelson embraced artistic freedom. That's how he got along with rebels like the Hag.

"If I'm going to put my two cents into every record, it'll be a Ken Nelson record," he says, shrugging his shoulders matter-of-factly. "I didn't want that. I wanted Merle Haggard. I wanted Buck Owens. I wanted Hank Thompson.

"I always figured you hired a person for what they could do. Not for what you could do." And now country music could recognize the contributions of Ken Nelson, a man who learned how to look at life through many windows.