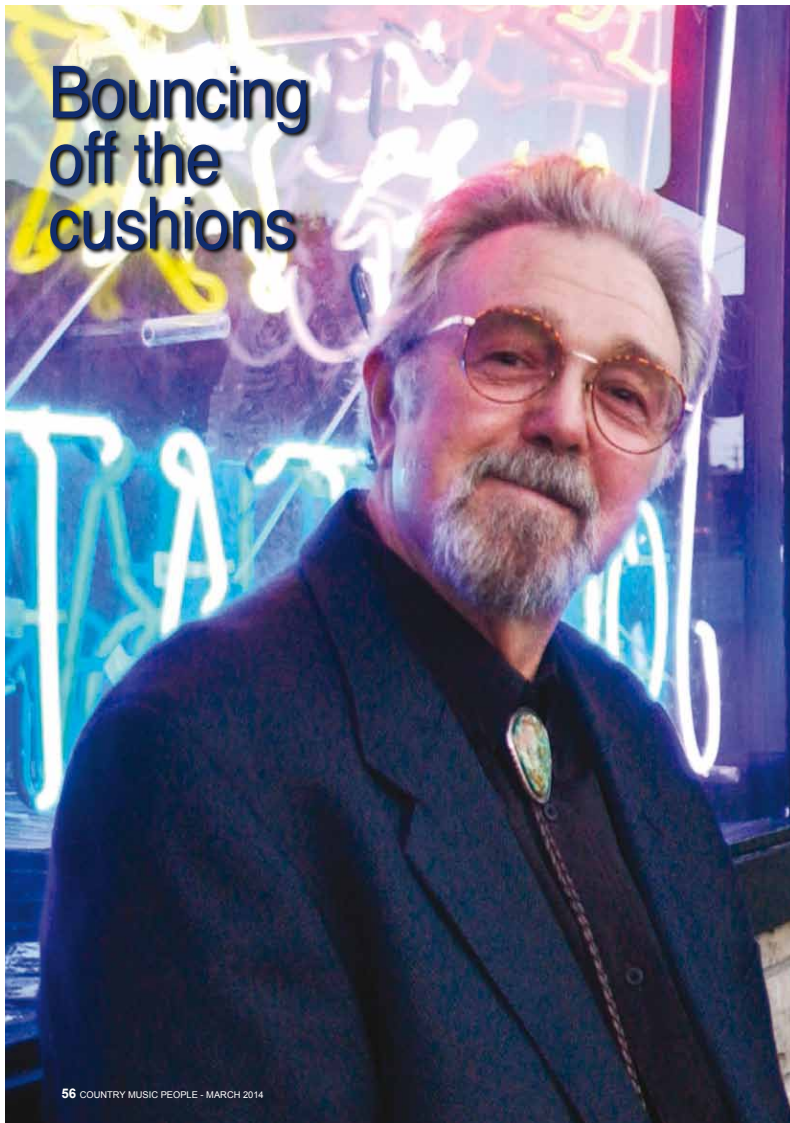


Bouncing off the cushions



EARL POOLE BALL

Douglas McPherson cues up an interview with the man who played piano with Johnny Cash for 20 years, and a galaxy of other stars besides. He has also just Ralph Mooney Musician's Award at the first Ameripolitan Awards.

He turned down the chance to play piano with Elvis and went to work for Johnny Cash instead. But only after a marriage counsellor told him to get a divorce.

Er, what, who...? Shoot. Let's back up, and look at that sequence of events more slowly.

To take the Elvis offer first, Earl Poole Ball reveals he was at a recording session with guitarist James Burton, when the latter announced he'd just landed the job of Presley's band leader. "He asked me if I'd like to go and work with them in Las Vegas and, at the time, I thought Elvis is gonna go to Vegas for six weeks and that will be the end of that. I'd just been hired by Capitol as a producer, which I'd always wanted to do, and so I said, 'Well, James, I guess I can't go on the road with Elvis.'"

Ball chuckles and adds, "Of course, Elvis went on the road for many, many years and it would have paid very, very well!"

As for Cash...

"I played a session for Johnny and he offered me a job. I thought about it for a year, because I really wasn't sure if I wanted to go on the road. But he kept offering the job to me.

"One day I went to a counselling



session with a psychologist to try and figure out a way of keeping my marriage together. My wife was supposed to come with me, but she wouldn't go and the psychologist said, 'You know what? If your woman's not shown up here, you should get a divorce.'"

That's not what you expect to hear from a marriage counsellor, but the guy was serious.

"He said, 'Do you own a lot of property together?' I said no. 'Do you have any children?' I said, no. 'Do you have a lot of money?' No. He said, 'Well, I suggest you get a divorce!'"

Ball didn't take the counsellor at his word, but he did take up the job of Cash's piano man.

"I thought, if I go on the road it will either make my marriage better

or it will make it worse, because I'll be out of the picture for long periods of time. So I called Johnny and I ended up going to work for him for the next 20 years."

Did it fix his marriage?
"Yeah!"
Ball bursts out laughing. "It ended it! And that's what needed to have happened."

Ball has trusted

his life to fate or, as he puts it, the universe, for more than half a century. It's taken him on a musical odyssey from Mississippi to California to Nashville and Austin, and seen him play and make records with an encyclopaedia of hit-makers including Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, Gram Parsons and Glen Campbell.

Having now made an autobiographical CD called *Pianography*, he reflects, "I guess I made myself available to the universe and it kept putting people in my path who were good people - people of accomplishment that I could learn from. I think if you get out and get into the flow and keep your attitude reaching out like that, then the universe takes care of you. Well, it took care of me."



Facing page, clockwise from top left:
 With his band band - The Sessionaires - at the Aces Club - City of Industry, CA 1965
 Ball with Minnie Pearl and Ken Curtis from Gunsmoke after winning Piano Player Of The Year at the 1967 Academy of Country Music Awards.
 Earle and Johnny Cash in rehearsal.
 Backstage with Chuck Berry in the mid-70s.
 With his band at the Houston, Texas-Silver Dollar Lounge-Old Galveston Highway -1962
 This page: Ball with the Cash family.

The Earl Poole Ball story began in the small town of Foxworth, Mississippi, when his mother decided her 8-year-old son should have piano lessons.

"She said I would be popular at parties if I learned to play piano. I thought that sounds good. So I started taking piano lessons from my aunt.

"When I was 13 or 14, I wanted to start playing popular music. I noticed that when my aunt was playing in church she used a lot more notes and chord progressions than were in the hymn book, so I had her teach me how to do that, which led me to being able to play the songs of the day, and country music in particular."

His ivory influences growing up

in the 1950s ranged from Jerry Lee Lewis to Floyd Cramer.

"I'm sure I was also listening to a lot of Pig Robbins, who played on so many country sessions, although I didn't know it was him. Another influence, because of his showmanship, was Jimmy Durante. I watched his TV show all the time and thought, well, mixing comedy with playing, that's good - I might want to do that one day."

The young Ball used his newly honed piano chops in collaboration with a songwriter called Zeno Goss who lived in nearby Columbia, Mississippi.

"Zeno couldn't play any instruments, but he could sing his

melodies. He had a piano and an old reel-to-reel tape recorder. So I'd go over to his house and accompany him on his demos."

Among the recipients of Zeno's songs was singer and sometime Governor of Louisiana, Jimmie Davis, who is best remembered by country fans for writing *You Are My Sunshine*.

"Jimmie wanted to run for Governor again and invited Zeno and me to go and play at a couple of fish fries to raise money for his political campaign. I used to listen to the radio a lot and I knew all his classics like *Nobody's Darlin' But Mine*. So we'd go out to these fish camps that wealthy people had out on the bayous. I'd back him up on his songs and Zeno was MC.

amplifier to begin with. But I soon got one and Mickey showed me how to hook it up. He also showed me how to put on strings when I'd break one and helped me get the piano in some semblance of tune."

Gilley also produced Ball's first single, *Married, Going Steady, Engaged*, which was released by a label run by Kenny Rogers' brother. The record wasn't a hit. But Gilley wasn't having hits himself at the time. Did Ball think Gilley felt overshadowed by his cousin's fame?

"Well, Mickey is a very intelligent person and I think he was smart enough to know being related to Jerry Lee was a plus for him," Ball recalls. "Jerry would come through town and sit in with Mickey many times, at whatever club Mickey was playing, so that increased Mickey's drawing power. But when he was able to break through with his own movie (*Urban Cowboy*) I think he was happy he no longer had to sound like Jerry Lee to draw a crowd."

Warming to his theme, Ball adds, "I saw Mickey in Nashville just after they'd made the movie. I hadn't seen it, but something about it told me it was going to be a big hit. I told him he was going to get busier than he'd ever been and he said, 'That'd be nice, but it probably ain't gonna do anything.' Little did he know!"

Urban Cowboy, which starred John Travolta and was shot largely at Gilley's eponymous nightclub, was a phenomenon that took country music to a whole new audience.

"Mickey had to go out and buy him a hat!" Ball laughs. "Because in that movie he didn't wear a hat, but when it came out everyone started wearing hats, so he had to get him a hat! He toured with a hat on!"

From Houston, Ball headed to Los Angeles where he found himself host of a regular jam session at a club called The Aces. Among the musicians who would drop in and play was the yet to be famous, let alone legendary, Gram Parsons.

Gram invited Ball to play on his first album, *Safe At Home*, which is now regarded as a seminal release in the development of country-rock. Ball reprised his role as session pianist on *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* by Parsons' subsequent band the Byrds. It was another disc credited as among the most influential of its time. So, did Ball have any idea that Parsons would be hailed as such a messianic figure in country-rock after his tragically early death in 1974?

"I had no idea - and I'm not sure he did, either. I've talked about this with some friends of mine and we all think Gram's looking down from heaven and laughing at all this. We never knew this guy who has become what he has in a lot of people's minds. But we're all glad for it."

Recalling the Parsons he knew, Ball says, "He was just doing what he wanted to do. He knew his country music and loved it, and I always admired that about him. We'd get together and chat once in a while. I'd go out to hear him at the Palomino



Left: Earl, Bobbie Nelson & Pinetop Perkins - Photo by Winker Withaneye
 Right: 1965 B&W taken at City of Industry, CA
 Below: W.S. Holland, Rev. Billy Graham, Earl, Johnny Cash

songs in the show and he had a lot of Christian people who would come to see him. He was doing the Billy Graham crusades sometimes - I got to play on one with him.

"Of course, later on, he fell off that wagon and got back into taking medication. I think getting into it for pain was what happened. He went to Betty Ford a couple of times. He meant to be straight, but it was really hard for him. He had that bug for altered consciousness that a lot of us did."

What was being around Cash like for the band at that point? Ball answers emphatically and without hesitation.

"It was scary! I had played clubs a lot. I'd taken speed and used to drink

Ball, meanwhile, was encouraged to move to Austin by a Cash disciple of sorts, Dale Watson. Now in his 70s, the piano man has become a fixture on the Austin scene, rotating band appearances between Earl Poole Ball and the Cosmic Americans, the Lucky Tomblin Band, Heybale and the Rockabilly Bluze Band.

Now that he's finally started recording in his own right, he promises his first album, *Pianography*, won't be his last.

"I'd like to do an album of half country songs and half Gospel - Saturday night and Sunday morning."

Ball's advice to a young musician contemplating his own musical odyssey is "Play music every chance you get, whether it's a little money



club in Hollywood on Monday nights. I'd go over to his house and it was like, drink a little whiskey, smoke a little grass and let's play some music."

During his time at the Aces, Ball was still flirting with the idea of becoming an artist. In 1967, he recorded another single, *Second And San Antone*, which is included on *Pianography*. A black and white publicity picture of the young singer-pianist adorns the back cover of the new release.

"That was taken out back in the Aces parking lot," he points out.

By the late 60s, however, Ball was in increasing demand as a session musician for West Coast-based artists including Buck Owens and Rick Nelson. His studio work led to him becoming an associate producer working with Ken Nelson at Capitol, and then a producer in his own right, first in L.A. and then in Nashville, where he helmed three number ones by Freddie Hart.

At that point, he reflects, "I guess I realised, maybe I'm not supposed to be an artist. Maybe I'm supposed to be a record producer and session player, and maybe I should be happy

with that, because I'm not young and pretty anymore."

Ball reconsiders that statement then laughs and adds, "I never was that pretty to begin with!"

Among the albums Ball produced was Cash's *Rockabilly Blues* - "It was a good record, but unfortunately it didn't have a hit single on it," - and Merle Haggard's near-chart-topper *A Tribute To The Best Damn Fiddle Player In The World (or, My Salute To Bob Wills)*.

"What I learned from Ken Nelson was to try and find an artist like Merle Haggard or Buck Owens who likes to create their own songs, so you don't have to find songs for them, and who is capable of leading the band and telling who to play what when.

"Ken had a good ear. He would sit in the booth and if a string was out on someone's guitar he could tell you which one it was - which is better than I could do. But his most outstanding ability was being a diplomat with his artists - giving them room to create, and finding people that could create. Both Johnny and Merle knew what they wanted."

Ball is particularly proud of his

post-production contribution to a song he didn't produce - Haggard's three-week chart-topper *Carohyn*.

"Merle called me from out on the road and said it needs one more thing, a harmony singer: 'Do you think you could get Glen Campbell to do that?' I thought, now here's a challenge! But I knew Glen from when I was working the bars in Houston. I called him and he said, 'I'd love to do that. Merle's always helped me. When things weren't happening for me, I would send him a couple of my records and he'd have his staff mail them out to radio stations.' So Glen told me he was recording on such and such day. I took over a multi-track machine and I think we got it second take."

Despite his burgeoning studio career, Ball was nevertheless tempted on tour with Cash from the mid-70s until the man in black's retirement from the road due to ill-health in the late 90s. Were they wild days?

"When I joined the group in 1977, he was post-wild days. His son was five or six and he was trying really hard to be a good daddy and live cleanly. He went to church with his wife. They loved to do Gospel



a lot. I gave up on all that about 1982 or 83. So I understood the pull that a substance would have for someone. But it was still scary. We had this really good guy called Johnny... then we had Cash. Sometimes it would be Johnny and sometimes it would be Cash."

Ball sighs. "But he did the best he could."

When Cash died in 2002 he left Ball a white baby grand piano as a token of thanks for his two decades of service.

or lots of money. Take some form of musical education. Know your musical theory. And, if at all possible, get a college degree in something you could do that will actually pay you money in case the music thing never happens. Have your dreams, but also get real."

As for himself, a Plan B was never required. Even when he was a teenager in Mississippi, supplementing his income selling floor brushes and cosmetics door to door, he had a

burgeoning TV career, playing piano in Red McCaffrey's Supermarket Showtime.

"People would recognise me from the TV and let me into their homes to buy cosmetics and scent," he recalls with a chuckle. "A lot of the little old ladies liked to buy some of the good-smellin' stuff..."

CMP

Earle Poole Ball: *Pianography* is available from www.earlpooleball.com