

JERRY REED - Passes at 71...He will be missed by all of us and millions more.

By PETER COOPER • Staff Writer-The Tennessean • September 2, 2008

Jerry Reed, country music's howling virtuoso and a star of stage, studio and screen, has died. Born Jerry Reed Hubbard, Mr. Reed suffered from emphysema and was in hospice care. He was 71, and he leaves an unparalleled legacy of laughter and song.

By the time Mr. Reed came to popular attention as Burt Reynolds' truck-driving sidekick in 'The Snowman' in the Hollywood trilogy Smokey and the Bandit, he was already a musical deity to the guitar players who admired the syncopated flurries he unleashed with a casual gleam. He was also a hit recording artist by that time, having topped the charts with 'When You're Hot, You're Hot' and 'Lord, Mr. Ford,' and having written songs for Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Porter Wagoner, Brenda Lee and others. Then there was his work as session guitarist for Presley, Waylon Jennings, Bobby Bare and many others. Mr. Reed enjoyed his comedic Hollywood roles (which included a part in the 1998 Adam Sandler film, The Waterboy), and he often smiled when movie fans would ask for an autograph without realizing that he was a singer and guitarist of significance. Music was most important to him, though. Asked by interviewer Frank Goodman which facet of music he preferred — songwriter, solo guitarist, session man or entertainer — Mr. Reed said, 'Hey, that's like trying to pick out your favorite leg.'

'There's nothing on earth as powerful as music, period,' he told Goodman. 'I mean, it's pretty hard to fight and hate and be angry when you're making music, isn't it?'

As Mr. Reed's health declined in recent years, he focused on spiritual studies and on bringing attention to veterans' issues.

'For 50 years, all I'd done was take, take, take,' he told The Tennessean's Tim Ghianni in 2007. 'I decided from now on it is going to be giving. And I'm way behind. We're all way behind. We live this life like what's down here is what it's all about. We're temporary, son, like a wisp of smoke.'

Mr. Reed was born in Atlanta, Ga., on March 20, 1937. He was the son of cotton mill workers Robert Spencer Hubbard and Cynthia Hubbard, who divorced in their son's first year. From fall of 1937 until 1944, the boy lived in orphanages and foster homes. He rejoined his mother when she married mill worker Hubert Howard in 1944.

Already transfixed by music, he listened to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio each Friday night, jumping around on a woodpile in lieu of a stage, and playing a hairbrush as if it was a rhythm guitar. Noticing his enthusiasm, Cynthia Howard bought a used guitar from a neighbor for \$7, presented it to her son and taught him two chords. He began striking the strings with a thumb-pick, a practice he continued throughout his career. When a guitar teacher told him to discontinue that method, an already headstrong Mr. Reed dropped the teacher rather than the pick.

Hearing finger-style guitarist Merle Travis play 'I Am A Pilgrim' caused young Mr. Reed to aspire to something beyond simplicity.

'I thought when I heard it, 'Boy, there it is! That man is walking with the big dog. He knows where the bodies are buried, and I want some of that,' Mr. Reed told Bob Anderson in a 1979 interview.

Another hero was banjo great Earl Scruggs, and Mr. Reed ultimately arrived at a guitar style that fused Scruggs' rapid torrents of notes with the rhythms heard in Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say.' That is the style that made Mr. Reed an inspiration to generations of guitarists, and though he would not fully realize his signature sound until the 1960s, he spent his high school years honing his musical and performing chops and displaying a talent and magnetism that set him apart from others at school.

In 1954, he played a self-penned song called 'Aunt Meg's Wooden Leg' for Atlanta publisher and radio host Bill Lowery, who began managing and booking the young man. A 30-day tour opening shows for Ernest Tubb and the Texas Troubadours ensued, and the experience was enough to convince Mr. Reed that high school was of little use to him.

'I knew what I was going to spend my life doing,' he later said. 'Nothing else made any sense. Nothing else made any difference.'

In 1954, a 17-year-old Mr. Reed played a show in Atlanta in honor of country star Faron Young, who had been discharged from the Army. Ken Nelson ran Capitol Records, and Nelson attended the Atlanta show. Lowery, who had hired Mr. Reed as a disc jockey at Atlanta's WGST, told Nelson that Capitol could do worse than to sign the

cotton mill boy from Georgia.

Reluctant to sign such a young act to Capitol, Nelson acquiesced. He told Mr. Reed to wait until his 18th birthday before recording, and in October of 1955 the men entered a Nashville studio and made a record. First single "If The Good Lord's Willing And The Creeks Don't Rise" did not make any great commercial waves, and neither did follow-up single "I'm A Lover, Not A Fighter." And neither did any others of Mr. Reed's Capitol recordings, as he flailed about for a form that rang true. He moved through country, pop and rockabilly, to little avail.

"My records were selling like hot cakes: About fifty cents a stack," he often joked in later years.

In 1958, Mr. Reed ended his association with Capitol. He enlisted in the United States Army in 1959, the same year he married Priscilla "Prissy" Mitchell. Army brass thought Mr. Reed's talents better suited for a stage than a battlefield, and the would-be warrior became a member of the army's Circle A Wranglers band. Meanwhile, Lowery kept pitching Mr. Reed's songs to others. In 1960, Brenda Lee had a Top 10 pop hit with Mr. Reed's "That's All You Gotta Do." That song was the "flip" side of Lee's wildly popular single "I'm Sorry." That success was a change for the better, as was a 1961 military discharge and the development of a unique guitar-playing method that would later be called "Claw style";

"If (Merle) Travis' thumb and index finger picking style was first generation, and Chet Atkins' use of thumb, index and middle finger was second, Reed's use of his entire right hand to pick (the famous "claw" style) was the wild, untamed and dauntingly complex third generation," wrote historian and journalist Rich Kienzle.

Mr. Reed switched from a steel-stringed acoustic guitar to a nylon-stringed Baldwin model, with an electronic "pickup" that allowed the guitar to be heard above a full band. He signed a Columbia Records contract in 1961, but that deal yielded no hits. His songwriting and session playing proved more lucrative, as he performed on hits for Bobby Bare and he penned Porter Wagoner's 1962 No. 1 hit, "Misery Loves Company." And Mr. Reed attracted a high-powered fan in Chet Atkins, the guitar star who ran Nashville's branch of RCA.

"Chet and I had got friendly, and he told me, 'You ain't never going to have a hit recording what's not you. Just go in there and be what you are.' Chet thinks I'm funky," Mr. Reed told Morton Moss of the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner.

Atkins expressed interest in Mr. Reed signing to RCA, and Mr. Reed broke the news to a Columbia Records executive that he would like to go to RCA. "It really broke his heart," Mr. Reed recalled, later. "Took him about 30 seconds to let me go."

Atkins was determined to record Mr. Reed as an atypical artist rather than molding him into a pre-established model. In his guitar work and in the songs he wrote, Mr. Reed revealed a humor and a wit that set him apart from other performers and endeared him to audiences.

The key was capturing that in a way that didn't dull spontaneity or intelligence, and Atkins figured quite correctly that he knew how to do this. Rather than asking Mr. Reed to write or record for a particular audience demographic, as he'd done on Capitol and Columbia, Atkins insisted that Mr. Reed be Mr. Reed.

"I owe almost every bit of success that has come to me to Chet Atkins," Mr. Reed told the Associated Press in 1999. "He's a nonconformist, and he suggested that I just play my guitar and sing my songs and he'd release singles."

The first best result of Mr. Atkins' prodding was instrumental showcase "The Claw," so named because of the way Mr. Reed's hand looked when playing in his intricate style.

Then, Mr. Reed came up with "Guitar Man," which showcased his guitar work, his voice and his storytelling ability. "Guitar Man" was followed by "Tupelo Mississippi Flash," which became Mr. Reed's first Top 20 hit, in 1967. "Tupelo Mississippi Flash" was a funky laughier that poked fun at an industry executive who didn't understand the power and reach of Elvis Presley.

In fact, Presley recorded two songs from Mr. Reed's pen, "U.S. Male" and "Guitar Man." Presley was unhappy with others' attempts to recreate Mr. Reed's guitar sound, and Mr. Reed received a telephone call from producer Felton Jarvis, asking how he did what he did. Mr. Reed told Jarvis that the only way to get the Jerry Reed sound was to have Jerry Reed on the session, asserting that most studio players are "straight pickers," while, "I play with my fingers and tune that guitar up all weird kind of ways."

Jarvis, and Presley, took note, and Mr. Reed performed on the Presley sessions. It all made sense: The only way to sound like Jerry Reed was to be Jerry Reed.

Mr. Reed wrote "Alabama Wild Man," a Top 50 country hit in 1968 that gave the native Georgian a fun but geographically incorrect nickname. But his breakthrough moment came in late 1970, when the funny, funky and swampy "Amos Moses" landed in the Top 10 of the pop charts and in the Top 20 of the country charts. An instrumental with Atkins won a Grammy in 1971, and the following year Mr. Reed won a best country male performance Grammy for his first No. 1 country smash, appropriately titled "When You're Hot, You're Hot." Two years later, he hit No. 1 again with the modern times lament, "Lord, Mr. Ford."

During this time, Mr. Reed was also appearing regularly on friend Glen Campbell's Goodtime Hour, and television types took notice of his charisma. In 1974, he played a joke-cracking role in W.W. and the Dixie Dance Kings. His best-loved film role came in 1977, when he starred as Cledus Snow, a.k.a. "The Snowman," in the Reynolds flick Smokey and the Bandit. Mr. Reed co-wrote the movie's theme song, "East Bound and Down," which spent two weeks at No. 2 on the Billboard Country singles chart.

The Hollywood success and country hits provided smiles for Mr. Reed's casual fans, but musicians also took notice of the staggering virtuosity behind the records. Brent Mason, now the top session man in Nashville, calls Mr. Reed "my favorite guitar player of all time." And scores of others sought to decipher the secrets behind Mr. Reed's rocket-fueled licks. As Guitar Town struggled to catch up, Mr. Reed notched another No. 1 hit with "She Got The Goldmine (I Got The Shaft)" and a No. 2 effort with "The Bird," in which Mr. Reed displayed his spot-on impressions of Willie Nelson and George Jones.

And, in terms of chart runs and guitar innovation, that was it. Mr. Reed had no Top 20 hits after 1983, and his triumphs following that were limited to live performance and movie roles. But the sound he got out of his guitar in the years between 1967 and 1983 is an influence that is more than temporary, more than a wisp of smoke.

"Like Django (Reinhardt), Chet and a few others, Jerry Reed created a unique style of guitar playing, one which will be carried on by admirers for generations to come," said esteemed musician David Hungate. Scholar John Knowles told Thomas Goldsmith, "His playing has the complexity of classical music but the rhythmic sense that comes from country, rock and gospel."

There were plenty who never knew of Mr. Reed as anything more than "The Snowman," or as the coach in The Waterboy. He was funny, and an entertainer, and in terms of movie-making that was enough. Yet Mr. Reed was also one of the most compellingly original guitarists of all time. He fully understood that most of the general public didn't know that, and he fully understood that many session guitarists not only understood it but attempted to replicate his feel and technique. And he was fine with all of that.

"Every dream I ever dreamed came true in my life," he told interviewer Calvin Gilbert in 2005. "I got to write hit songs... And I got to be on phonograph records... I'm a cotton mill boy, and I got to go to Hollywood. Can you imagine that? Why, yeah, my goodness gracious. Go figure."