

Pride of America, RCA APL1-0757 ("Mississippi Cotton Picking Delta Town").
Pride of Country Music, RCA Victor LSP 3775 ("Just between You and Me").
Songs of Love by Charley Pride, RCA Victor LSP 4837.
A Sunshiny Day, RCA Victor LSP 4742.
Sweet Country, RCA APL1-0217.

TOM T. HALL

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Tom T. Hall tells stories. About Pamela Brown, the girl who made him a success by marrying someone else; about his Grandma, who whistled "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"; about a deaf-mute girl named Ramona and her tobacco-spitting suitor, Bad-Eye Thompson; about Coot Marseilles, a former Mississippi yardman who now drives a Ford automobile around the streets of Heaven; about a red-haired woman up in West Virginia who "gave her heart to Jethro and her body to the whole damn world";¹ about a drunk lady named Alice and an army buddy named Yates and Bill Crump and Windy City Anne and you and me and a lot of folks we both know. And what's more, he's very good at it.

When country music people start talking about songwriters, they don't waste much time getting around to Tom T., whose insight, wit, and sophistication have earned him a secure spot in the front rank of Nashville balladeers. During the past ten years, Hall has had over two hundred of his songs recorded and has seldom been without at least one hit record. Several efforts, including "Harper Valley PTA," "The Year That Clayton Delaney Died," and "Old Dogs, Children, and Watermelon Wine," have become country classics that justify his selection by the Nashville Songwriters Association as Country Music Songwriter of the Year for 1972. His 1973 crossover hit, "I Love," and his frequent appearances on network television shows have also garnered Hall a respectable following among audiences with less than a total allegiance to country music. With any luck at all, he is going to be around for a long time.

Tom T. Hall was born in 1936 in Olive Hill, Kentucky, to the Reverend Virgil L. and Della Lena Hall. It would have been natural for Tom T. to follow his father into the ministry — “As far back as anybody in my family can remember, there has always been a Thomas Hall who was a preacher” — but he claims he can never remember a time when he was not determined to enter some realm of show business. Some of his earliest memories are of having his mother wake him at 5:30 A.M. to hear Ernest Tubb’s fifteen-minute radio show from Nashville. Tom was only a youngster at the time and remembers toddling over to a little rocking chair and listening to Tubb while his mother cooked breakfast for the family, then going back to bed when the program was over. Before long, Tom began playing a homemade instrument fashioned of stick, string, and salt box. Then, when he was eight, he was given a broken Martin guitar which his father restored to good working condition, and Tom T. Hall was on his way, picking and grinning for folks in the neighborhood, playing for an occasional pie supper, and coming in second in amateur contests behind “some old guy in overalls” who played the harmonica and did the buck and wing.²

Sometime along in here — Tom T. seldom bothers to pin down events in his life closer than two or three years — he fell in with Clayton Delaney, the first innovative musician he had ever met. In “The Year That Clayton Delaney Died,” which Hall still regards as his favorite song, he recalls that

Clayton was the best guitar picker in our town.

I thought he was a hero and I used to follow Clayton around.

I often wondered why Clayton, who seemed so good to me,

Never took his guitar and made it down in Tennessee.³

Clayton lived out on a place near Olive Hill called Tick Ridge. He was just in his early twenties when he died, but he had gone off to Indiana and Ohio and nearly smoked and drank himself to death. He just wore himself out and got sick and came back to Kentucky. He used to talk about a band he’d had back in Ohio. He’d say, “Tom, I tell you, son, it was a great band. Finest band in the whole damn country. We all had shirts just alike.” Now that was a hell of an outfit when you got a band together and they all had shirts just alike. And they had big puffed sleeves and glowed in the dark. Those old boys would get out their best pair of pants, with a little red belt about half

an inch wide, a pair of black loafers and white socks, and those big shirts and they’d crawl up on that bandstand and do those Hank Williams songs and they’d wear those troops out.

On Saturday nights he used to play out in front of a store in Lawton, Kentucky. Actually, Lawton was just a store, but it was a hellacious store. They sold everything. If they needed some other kind of service in town, they just added to the store. And they had a plug on the outside. Well, Clayton and some of the boys would get a bunch of moonshine and they would hook up to that plug and pick and just have a hell of a party. They had a little old amp that looked like a damn Wheaties box and when they played it would jump up and down. But he was hell, man. He showed me you can be original. When you first start out in country music, you almost always have an idol that you try to sing as much like as you can. Well, when Clayton would sing a song, he wouldn’t sing it like the guy that did the record. He would do it his own way. He might do it a little faster, or phrase it a little different, or do it in a different key. I listened to him and it dawned on me there was a way to be an individual, to be different. To me, Clayton was a Beethoven, or a Jimmie Rodgers, although nobody except me and about thirty other people probably ever heard of him.

Tom’s mother died when he was eleven, and when he was fourteen he had to quit school and go to work in a garment factory after his father was wounded in a gun accident. When the factory laid him off after a year and a half, Tom T. Hall entered show business on a professional basis, with the assistance of a motion picture impresario named Hurley Curtis. “Uncle Curt — he wasn’t really my uncle, but that’s what everybody called him — had a screen he would put on the top of his ’47 Chevy. We’d go out to these little towns around Olive Hill and show movies about Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry, and the Durango Kid. Before the regular feature started, we’d run little film strips — ‘trailers’ we called them — advertising for the local merchants, and I’d announce over the films, stuff like ‘Over at Jones’s Grocery they’ve got bargains galore all over the store; save like you never saved before. Get these tremendous values while they last.’ That was how I got my start.”

Uncle Curt also encouraged and helped Tom with his first band, the Kentucky Travelers, formed when he was sixteen. After the Travelers

gained experience playing at schoolhouses and dances in the Olive Hill area, they landed a radio show on station WMOR in nearby Morehead, Kentucky. Like other country songwriters before and since, Tom T. had written a song about a local brand of flour, and the man who ran the Polar Bear Flour Company agreed to sponsor the show. Tom Hall and the Kentucky Travelers sold a lot of flour in the next eighteen months, and when the band broke up after Hurley Curtis died, WMOR asked Tom to stay on as a disc jockey.

One of his more delightful songs, "The Little Lady Preacher," grew out of these early radio days. "This girl's daddy taught her how to preach," Tom recalls,

and by the time she was eighteen or nineteen, boy, could she draw a crowd. She had this program every Sunday morning at the station. I would turn the program on — "This is WMOR, Morehead, Kentucky, 1400 on your radio dial, and now it's time for the Old Time Gospel Hour with the Rev. Miss Whatever-her-name-was" — and then I'd turn my mike off and get the level just right and step out and accompany her and her guitar player, Luther Short ["a hairy-legged soul lost out in sin"], on the bass. She always started off by singing, "Well, while I was sleeping, somebody touched me," which I thought was a hell of an opener. At the end of the program, instead of just winding down and quitting, she would preach her way off. I guess the audience figured she just went on preaching all day.

In the song, Tom notes that the nubile young evangelist was "developed to a fault" and would "punctuate the prophecies with movements of her hips." He acknowledges he had some difficulty keeping his mind on theological discourse, so that when she told him she always said a little prayer for him, "I told her, in a way, that I'd been praying for her, too."⁴

After four years as the number one disc jockey in Morehead, young Hall began to yearn for a larger world. As he walked along the little town's hot, barren streets one summer day in 1957, on his way back to the station after lunch, a poster describing a job filled with travel and educational opportunities caught his eye, and Tom T. stepped inside to make successful application for a position with the United States Army. "Back at the station, I told the boss I wanted some time off. He said I couldn't leave because we needed to sell all this flour. I told

him I'd be back and he asked me when. 'Oh,' I told him, 'about three years.' There wasn't too much he could do, really. He told everyone that he'd fired me."⁵

The army made good on its promises, sending Hall to Germany and allowing him to finish high school. It also gave him opportunity to continue his development as a performer and songwriter. He and several other musicians formed a group that enjoyed considerable success playing NCO clubs and Armed Forces Network radio. Both because of the difficulty of getting new material from the States and his desire to tailor his songs to GI audiences, Tom T. began writing his own songs, turning out numbers like "Short-Timer's Blues," "Thirty-six Months of Loneliness," "Gasthaus Rock," and "3,000 Gallons of Beer." The songs clicked and Hall began to recognize he had talent as a writer, but it took him a while to decide just what to do with it.

When he was discharged in 1961, he went back to Morehead, took his old job at WMOR, and bought a grocery store that he let his father run. But Morehead hadn't grown as much as Tom had, and when Slim Underwood, one of the original Kentucky Travelers, wrote and told Tom that if he ever got to Connersville, Indiana, to look him up and they would start a band, as Tom tells it, "I gave the grocery store to my father and my notice to the radio station, and one evening I drove up to Slim's front door. That was on a Tuesday. On Thursday we had a band." The band, who called themselves the Technicians, played local dates until the drummer, Jack Robinson, made enough money to build a TV shop and Slim Underwood saved enough to get married. When the group broke up, Hall ran through a series of disc jockey jobs in Kentucky and West Virginia. "I was so tired of growing up," he says, "that I just thought I had better rest two or three years before doing anything else." The longest stretch was at WRON in Ronceverte, West Virginia, a quiet little town of eighteen hundred people.

For two years, I wasn't anybody. I worked at the radio station and had a room over the library. I would do my gig at the station, go to the library, check out some books, then read and sleep till it was time to go to work again. I read Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway, and Faulkner. Not just the books, but all the articles and essays and letters from home, the whole thing. Then on Sunday afternoon I

played poker and got drunk at the Moose Lodge, of which I was Junior Governor. I did that for over two years. I didn't have any friends or enemies. Looking back on it, it was kind of a weird experience.

Though Hall had chosen a low-profile existence, these were years of fermentation rather than vegetation. He was writing songs again, and friends in the music business were telling him he ought to take them to Nashville. "I wasn't really in any hurry," he insists.

I know it sounds funny to say it, but I never had any doubt in the world that I would make it. I didn't know how I would do it, but I always knew I would. I figured, hell, somebody has to do it. Ernest Tubb can't live forever. I figured if I had any talent, they'd find me. And they did. I was also booking shows, and one night after a show at the armory we went back to the station and had a "guitar pulling," with everybody just sitting around singing their songs. A guy who was a promotions man for Newkeys Music was there and he carried some of my songs back to Nashville. Jimmy Key liked "D.J. for a Day" and got Jimmy Newman to record it and it went to number one. And from then on things just got bigger and bigger.

Key recognized what he had found and signed Hall to a Newkeys contract, but could not persuade him to move to Nashville. Tom T. was sure he wanted to write, but journalism and fiction attracted him as much as songwriting, so he moved to WBLU in Salem, Virginia, and enrolled at Roanoke College to get some formal training. This was to be Tom's last stop on the road to Music City. When Dave Dudley recorded another of his songs, "Mad," and it began to move up in the charts, Key finally convinced Hall it was time to come to Nashville.

Hall gives great credit to Key for having helped him adapt to the Nashville scene by teaching him how to polish his songwriting techniques and fit his material to the needs of various performers. For the first year, 1964, Tom T. lived on a fifty-dollar-a-week draw against future royalties and wrote songs four or five hours a day. Key's partner, Jimmy Newman, who often took Tom T. with him on the road, marveled at his diligence:

We'd share a motel room, and in the morning while I went down to get breakfast, he'd stay up in the room, have coffee sent up — lots of coffee — and he'd have one or two really good songs written by the

time I got back. He tells me that early morning's the best time for him to write, when it's a new day and everything is fresh.

I've seen him write a song while I was entertaining. He'd be off to the side of the stage watching us work, and he'd be writing at the same time. And not only would he write the song, but I'd call him up on stage as a guest, he'd introduce himself and tell the audience that he'd just written this song — and then he'd sing it. He's got a photostatic mind. He'd sing that song he'd just written word for word and note perfect, as often as not without even writing it down on a piece of paper.⁶

Hall's industry paid off. Before long, Newman, Dudley, Roy Drusky, Johnny Wright, Burl Ives, Stonewall Jackson, Flatt and Scruggs, and other established stars were recording his songs and asking for more. Eventually, inevitably, Jimmy Key suggested to Tom that he ought to think about making a record himself. Afraid that performing would interfere with his writing, Hall put Key off for about a year. Finally, with Jerry Kennedy of Mercury as his producer — an arrangement that continues to the present — he recorded "I Washed My Face in the Morning Dew," "Ballad of Forty Dollars," "A Week in a Country Jail," and "Salute to a Switchblade," and Nashville had another Most Promising Male Vocalist.

The keystone of Tom T. Hall's career, of course, was his 1968 hit, "Harper Valley PTA." Like many of his songs, this story of a swinging woman who told off a roomful of small-town hypocrites was based on a real incident. It rang true, and within a week after Jeannie C. Riley recorded it, Tom was assured of the kind of economic freedom and artistic license virtually every serious writer seeks. "Harper Valley" made Tom a lot of money — "It was like walking down the street and suddenly bending over and finding \$100,000" — but it would have made him a lot more if he had recorded it himself. Since 1968, Tom T. Hall the writer has saved his best songs for Tom T. Hall the performer, and since 1970, they have been copyrighted and published by his own firm, Hallnote.

Hall's tunes are pleasant enough, but, as has always been the case in country music, tune is subservient to lyric, and many of his songs have stretches that are little more than talking to musical accompaniment.

He has recorded some fine tender ballads in his radio-announcer baritone, but his characteristic style is to tuck his guitar up under his chin to let the microphone pick up the driving beat and just "rare back" and tell his story. Even at high speed, his eye and ear and memory are so accurate that he somehow captures the subtlest nuances of the men in southern towns who sit around feed stores and filling stations swapping stories with the county agent and the butane man.

Most of his characters are working people. They are neither amazingly strong nor amazingly weak, just amazingly real and familiar. They are people with names like Fred and Jan and Barbara Walker and Milton Howard and the Stigall boy. They work down at the Shell station and raise hogs and drive school buses and pour coffee at the Ed and Lois Cafe in towns like Cartersville, Georgia, and Hyden, Kentucky, towns linked not by superhighways but by two-lane blacktops

With signs beside the road like "Jesus Saves"
And "Relieve yourself the fast and gentle way."⁷

Tom T. knows that people like this don't have time to pine over lost love for very long. They have to deal with relatives who have become alcoholics or gone crazy or both, and figure how to get the forty dollars owed them by a dead man, and come to terms with the way people treat veterans who have had their legs shot off in the war, and make peace with getting old, "when nobody wants your body anymore."⁸ But you never really doubt that the people Hall sings about are going to survive. They are going to get up tomorrow morning and do whatever it is they have to do because, well, that's what most people do. And Tom T. Hall seems to understand about most people, at least most people who grew up in the country or small towns, or almost anywhere in the South, and maybe, just maybe, almost anywhere else.

Like all master storytellers, Tom T. knows how to tease the universal out of the particular, how to find the one detail that will summon up the entire scene. "I write about the things I know best," he says, "but I've always believed that, by doing that, I was writing about everybody in the world. You can write about some old sonofabitch in Carter County that did the same thing that Hitler did, just on a smaller scale. Olive Hill is a little world, and everything that has ever happened anywhere has happened at some time or another in Olive Hill. You don't

have to go to the eye of the hurricane, because those same winds will eventually blow through your own window. All you have to do is be able to see it. The thing I really want to do is to have someone listen to my songs and say, 'Well, I'll be damned. I thought I was the only one who knew that.'"

Hall acknowledges that writing is a craft as well as a talent and will fuss over a line or phrase until it is just right, until it sounds like the most natural thing in the world, but he admits that songwriting comes rather easy to him.

Whatever it is that I do is not anything that I learned to do, any more than people learn to wiggle their ears. You've seen guys that can wiggle their ears. They go to a party and somebody says, "Hey, Fred, wiggle your ears." He wiggles them and they say, "Damn, how'd you learn to do that?" and he says, "I don't know. I just wiggle 'em." Well, the gift of songwriting is not unlike the gift of ear wiggling. It's just that ear wiggling isn't big this year and songwriting is. A lot of people think that I have chosen to be a songwriter over being a doctor or an astronaut or president. They figure that if you could be a successful songwriter, hell, you could have done anything. They figure I'm superinformed and talented and compassionate, but that's not it at all. It's just what I do. I could have gotten a hormone or molecule or something out of place and I would have wound up wiggling my ears. Instead, I sit around and drink wine and talk about thoughts that move the universe.

Cashbox magazine once characterized Hall's work as "musical journalism." It is an apt description. Tom T. has a strong commitment to accurate reporting, in the hope that folk may somehow benefit if somebody with a steady hand holds a clear mirror up to their lives. He seldom editorializes strongly, either to praise or to condemn. Instead, he consistently takes a stance epitomized in his song about the little lady preacher, after she ran off with Luther Short:

Lord, if I judge 'em,
Let me give 'em lots of room.⁹

Almost always there is a seasoned reporter's sense of detachment, a standing off and looking at things through a gently cynical eye. In "Ballad of Forty Dollars," Tom takes the role of a gravedigger idly

watching the funeral procession go by and marveling at the chrome on the lead limousine.

Well, that must be the widow in the car, and would you take a look at that?

That sure is a pretty dress. You know, some women do look good in black.

He's not even in the ground and they say his truck is up for sale. They say she took it pretty hard, but you can't tell too much behind a veil.¹⁰

Like any good journalist, Tom T. is constantly alert for the situation, the incident, the personality, the line that might form the basis of a song. One song grew out of the time he shared a hospital room with a crusty old hog farmer — "His way was hogs and his nature was tough" — whom doctors had given up for dead but who got up, got dressed, and went home because he couldn't find any other answer to the basic question of his existence: "Who's gonna feed them hogs?"¹¹ Two more recent songs, "Ravishing Ruby," and "Old Dogs, Children, and Watermelon Wine," were sparked by chance comments of strangers. "We pulled into a truck stop early one morning," Tom recalls, "coming off the hills out of Fresno, California. A trucker recognized me and insisted on buying my breakfast. I gave him a record and he asked me to autograph it to 'Ravishing Ruby.' Well, that triggered something and I had the song about half written by the time I got back to the bus.

Ravishing Ruby, she's been around for a while.

Ravishing Ruby, she was a truck-stop child.

Born in the back of a rig, somewhere near L.A.

Ravishing Ruby, you poured a lot of hot coffee in your day.¹²

I've met a lot of chicks like that. They work in those truck stops and sleep in a little bunkhouse out back of the place. If they get a day off, they might go to the K-Mart and buy a new dress, then come back and talk to the truck drivers all day. They'll take those damned old yellers and just smile and work thirty-four hours straight. They're real great chicks."

"Old Dogs" grew out of a conversation with a janitor in a Miami lounge, one night after Tom T. had performed at the 1972 Democratic National Convention.

I was sittin' in Miami, pouring blended whiskey down,
When this old gray black gentleman was cleaning up the lounge.

There wasn't anyone around except this old man and me.
The guy who ran the bar was watching Ironsides on TV.
Uninvited he sat down and opened up his mind
On old dogs, and children, and watermelon wine.

When the old man finished his philosophical meanderings, Hall tells us

I found my pen and copied down that line.
'Bout old dogs, and children, and watermelon wine.¹³

By the time he got back to Nashville, he had written the rest of the song on the back of a sickbag from the airplane. Several of his songs share this characteristic of letting us watch him as he writes. In "Kentucky, Feb. 27, '71," he recounts the insightful musings of a reflective old farmer, then closes with

I guess we must have talked a half a day,
Until I told him that I'd best be on my way.
He shook my hand and said, "I'm glad I met you, Mr. Hall,
But I guess there ain't no song here after all."¹⁴

Tom T.'s songs not only tell us how they came to be written, but also help us chronicle the various stages of his career, as in "A Song for Uncle Curt" and "Thank You, Connersville, Indiana." In "Homecoming," he sketches a vignette of a young performer on the short side of success who returns home for a brief visit and tries to soothe his father's anxieties about the kind of work he does:

No, we don't ever call them beer joints;
Night clubs are the places where I work.
You meet a lot of people there, but no,
There ain't no chance of getting hurt.¹⁵

More recently, sad to say, Tom's songs have begun to reflect a bit of weariness, not so much with his music itself as with the life that goes with performing it. Sometimes it appears in funny-sad-lonely songs about a traveling entertainer stuck in an old hotel in Des Moines, where it sure can get cold, or fogged in with the Spokane Motel blues while the rest of his friends are drinking wine in Atlanta or watching the dogs

run in Memphis, or reading through the Tulsa telephone book trying to find a girl whose last name he can't remember. Sometimes it takes the form of a resigned recognition that

What a picker does for others
Is the thing he's mainly doing for himself.¹⁶

That is not exactly classic anomie, and we needn't expect to pick up our newspapers some morning to read that Tom T. Hall has been found dead of an overdose of drugs in Shreveport. Like the people he writes about, he is tough and he is going to make it. He is just looking in his own mirror, and sometimes that can hurt a man approaching forty.

In person, as well as in his songs, Hall wrestles continually with the problem of reconciling the many parts that constitute the whole of his complex being: the wise innocent from Olive Hill who neutralizes tragedy and absurdity with humor and gentle irony; the man who knows he has remarkable talent but wants nonetheless to think of himself as ordinary; the public figure who is, except for his songs, a surprisingly private person; the performer who would like to spend more time writing and fooling with the hounds on his farm in Brentwood; the man who takes friendship with sufficient seriousness that he finds superficial chatter with strangers something of a trial; the shrewd businessman who must carefully calculate what the public wants if he is to remain successful, yet retains a pugnacious grip on his personal and artistic independence.

Tom T. wears his graying hair short but stylish and often performs in the same double-knit trousers, sport shirt, and jacket that he wears to sit around the hotel. He looks as if he probably has to fight to keep his weight down — he promises that when he is forty, he is going to quit smoking, get into shape, and get saved all at the same time — and, though his round face can spring a broad smile, he most often looks rather serious, even distant; not beaten, but a little sad, with a substantial yet bearable burden on his considerable shoulders. With old friends, fans, writers, members of his band, or apparently anyone else, he will converse actively for a while, then, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, just stop talking and look off and not hear what is going on around him. I don't know where he goes. Perhaps he is driving along

some back road in Kentucky. But there is no doubt he is gone. The tendency is noticeable and Tom acknowledges it readily: "Many people think I am deaf. I started to wonder myself, but a doctor told me there was nothing wrong with my hearing; I just don't pay attention very good. I guess that's right."

Like most country performers, of course, Hall treats his fans courteously. He will sit patiently through the fawnings of people who try to get him to remember the time they bought him a beer in Oklahoma City in 1971. And when a ten-year-old boy who has met him a few minutes earlier brings his younger sister out to the bus to meet a star — "Introduce yourself, Dyama" — Tom will stand as if receiving royalty. But he gets a bit testy, after they leave, at people who bring him a present and assume they have purchased the right to a couple of hours of his time, and he grows increasingly unwilling to make a false show of friendship. "I don't like to be dishonest. I don't bother to learn people's names if I'm not going to see them again. If I get to know somebody, I do it through the natural evolutionary process. If they insist that I be familiar, then I just say whatever I think they want to hear, but I don't like to meet a guy, then ten minutes later give the impression we are old buddies and that he will be the first guy I will call the next time I come to town, because I'll probably forget him. That makes a lot of people mad. They think you don't like them, which has nothing to do with it at all. I just don't like to do anything phony."

This effort to be honest fairly radiates from Tom's songs. It has often been noted that American popular culture in general and country music in particular have a strong tendency to lament the passing of the good old days when people lived on farms or in small towns and give unquestioning allegiance to values held in common. Such sentiments sell records and books and movies because they simplify and provide easy answers to complicated problems, and most folk prefer easy answers. But, deep down, they know such answers are too easy, and at least part of the reason they like Tom T. Hall is because he knows that, too. Tom T. writes about little towns, but he seldom romanticizes them. In "Trip to Hyden," he describes the bleak poverty of Appalachian Kentucky and notes that

Every hundred yards a sign proclaimed that Christ was coming soon,
And I thought that, man, he'd sure be disappointed if he did.¹⁷

In another song he acknowledges the tendency to view the bucolic little towns of his youth in an idyllic light, but admits that

Death is just as real in Olive Hill
As it is in some big city by a mill.¹⁸

And he knows why he and his contemporaries have moved away, even though they grew up thinking it was "A Million Miles to the City." In "Kentucky, Feb. 27, '71," the old man, who lived on a farm twenty-seven miles from Olive Hill, explains that you just can't make a decent living in those Kentucky hills:

You know, son, people used to tell their kids,
"Now, I don't want you to have to work the way I did."
They don't, and some will tell you it's a shame.
But you have to think before you place the blame.¹⁹

They have moved to the city for the same reason Tom T. Hall moved to the city. That is where the jobs and the money are. And, overall, they prefer to stay there and think about how good the small towns were rather than to pack up and move back. "When you are prosperous," Tom observes, "you think you would like to go back and relive those old days, but it wouldn't be the same. I wouldn't walk two miles to hear Clayton pick over at Lawton. I'd get on my Honda and ride out to someplace where they had a rock group playing."

Two of Hall's early songs, "Hello, Vietnam" and "Mama, Tell Them What We're Fighting For," helped set off the rash of patriotic, even jingoistic, songs that appeared in the late sixties and early seventies. But to use these to brand Tom T. with the stereotypical nativistic image so often associated with country music would be as unfair as to imagine that "Okie from Muskogee" and "Fightin' Side of Me" express the whole of Merle Haggard's social philosophy. Dogmatic moralizing is not Tom's style, but his basic social and political convictions have shifted somewhat to the left — he backed McGovern in the 1972 election, though not without reservation — and it shows in his songs. In "America the Ugly," "I Want to See the Parade," and "The Promise and the Dream," he laments the plight of minorities, Bowery bums, the elderly, and the Appalachian poor with an empathy befitting Woody Guthrie or Pete Seeger. A more recent effort, though not a very good song, tells of a man who hated freckles (read "black skin"). After

poking fun at the man's follies, such as not wanting his daughter to marry a freckled person, Tom drops what little subtlety he has used and closes the song with

The man who hated freckles may be sick
But as far as I'm concerned
He was a stupid sonofabitch.²⁰

You seldom find that particular sentiment expressed quite so clearly in your average country song.

Tom is skeptical — perhaps too skeptical — about the influence such songs have on his audience: "I hate to say it, but I don't think a lot of them really understand what I am talking about. So many of them just listen to the surface and hear what they want to. The ones who can appreciate it hear it and understand it, and the others just go right on by. One of my songs goes

If they hang them all they'll get the guilty.
If they hang them all they cannot miss.
If they hang them all they'll get the guilty.
Been a lot of problems solved like this.

Well, the last verse of that song warns that if you take that approach,

Remember, they're going to get you, too.²¹

But they don't hear that line. They'll say, "That's what they ought to do, too, is hang all those so-and-sos!" They don't get the message that if you give the law the opportunity to shoot everybody they disagree with, they'll shoot us, too." The title song from Hall's 1973 album *For the People in the Last Hard Town* describes the phenomenon well:

They came to see the people that they thought we were and never
changed their mind.
They explained away the difference 'cause the folks that love a picker
can be blind.²²

Despite his libertarian sentiments, Tom T. questions his own motives for writing songs of social comment. "I don't like myself when I sound too liberal or good-guyish. There's been such a rash of people just determined to be righteous, but most of it is just through phrase and word and not through deed. They are righteous by saying the right thing at the right time." In "Too Many Do-Goods," he expresses his

doubts as to what a Baez or a Seeger or a Dylan — or a Hall — can accomplish just by singing about the problems of the world:

We got too many thinkers looking for the answer in the wind.

We got too many do-goods and not enough hard-working men.

I appreciate your sympathies and I believe in missionary work.

But a little bit of bending down and helping your brother wouldn't hurt.²³

"I wonder," Hall reflects, "how many things I say because I know 'it'll play in Peoria.' For example, I determined a long time ago that I couldn't hate minorities. I was very pleased with myself. Then it dawned on me that I couldn't stand a damn bigot. I've just pointed my prejudices in a different direction, but maybe bigots have as much reason to be bigots as a black does to be black or a Chicano to be a Chicano. That bothers me a lot. Still, maybe I have some kind of advantage in realizing that I'm probably not worth a shit."

Paradoxically, one source of Hall's self-deprecatory reflections is the warm acceptance he has begun to receive outside traditional country music circles. Part of this, of course, is the result of a general surge in the popularity of country music, although Tom T. doubts anyone knows just how widespread the "country craze" really is.

When I played in Carnegie Hall in 1973, the press and some very intelligent critics wrote that I had turned New York City upside down, that New York City was giving me standing ovations. That was absolutely asinine. It wasn't that at all. There were three or four hundred people there with their binoculars and tuxedos and they dug it, I guess, but the other twenty-two hundred were just Tom T. Hall fans, people from Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee, country people who happened to be living in New York. When you get ten million people together in one area, you ought to be able to find twenty-five hundred hillbillies. They knew what I was going to do before the bus ever got to town, and they were prepared to raise hell about it. New York didn't come to see me, not the New York you have in your mind. When I walked into Carnegie Hall, it was just like walking into Panther Hall in Fort Worth. It was the same people.

Whoever it was that came to Carnegie Hall, however, Hall's singular style has won him many authentically new fans among the "cosmic cowboys," long-haired freaks who have adopted western garb that

makes them look more like rustlers than ranchers and who have taken a shine to the rockier edges of country music. Tom T. recently played a four-night stand in Austin at the Armadillo World Headquarters, a cavernous funky-tonk that caters primarily to such a clientele. Four-nighters are rare for Hall, and he agreed to the engagement only because Willie Nelson, the trailboss of Austin's cosmic cowboys, old friend Darrell Royal, Waylon Jennings, and a few other picking and drinking buddies who had played there urged him to accept it. His passion to avoid phoniness leaves Tom a bit suspicious of young people in costume and made him openly apprehensive about the Armadillo engagement.

I can't come on stage and do their thing. I can't be that disorganized. So when I come on stage, I think they make a sacrifice for me. I think they say to themselves, "I like this man, and I like his music, so for this hour that he is on stage, I am going to be a little less hip. Sitting here in the dark, no one will know it. I'll cheer and everything and then after he leaves, I'll go back to being real hip." Now I've been broke, I've been sick, I've been in jail. I've been in trouble, I've been physically ill, I've been mentally ill. I've been real high and real low. I've won some fights and lost some. I know what it means to be hip. Kids who are dressing up and trying to be what I am, without all the mileage I've got, just don't impress me. They're trying to be thirty-seven years old, but you can't do that until you live thirty-seven years. I know they enjoy it, but it's like playing cowboys and Indians.

The crowd at the Armadillo the first night, a Wednesday, was smaller than expected. Tom was tired from the trip down from Nashville and let his band play too long before he came on stage. When he finally appeared, he looked and felt a bit out of place. He gave a good show, but made little apparent effort to get close to the audience. When they asked for an encore, he sang a song he claimed to have written for Billy Joe Shaver, Willie Nelson, and Johnny Rodriguez:

Joe, don't let your music kill you.

It's a thing that's supposed to fill you.

It's a thing that's supposed to make you happy.

Taking pills and drinking whiskey,

Picking can be mighty risky.

Joe, don't let your music kill you.

Nobody cares.²⁴

Ed Wilson, manager of the Armadillo, confided he would have preferred a more upbeat finale, and several people in the backstage area appeared disappointed.

Hall rested the next day, began the Thursday night concert with an apology for Wednesday night's, and relaxed noticeably, with good results all around. And he didn't sing that downer about Joe. On Friday and Saturday nights he drew big audiences, divided about evenly between cosmic cowboys and "kickers," standard-brand country fans who stole uneasy glances at the company they were keeping and sniffed the air as if wondering why anybody would want to burn good rope. At the end of each of these shows the crowd jammed the front of the stage and held Tom for several encores. It is no doubt true that "the folks that love a picker can be blind," but as one watched freaks and kickers intermingle, touch inadvertently, and smile in common enjoyment over the stories they had heard, one sensed they might be thinking, "Well, I'll be damned. I thought we were the only ones who knew that." And as they handed him cans of Lone Star beer, bottles of Boone's Farm Apple Wine, and even a single cigarette that did not look as if it had been manufactured in Winston-Salem, one felt fairly sure they were trying to say something to old T. Something like

Tom, don't let your music kill you.
Somebody cares.

Quotations from Tom T. Hall, except where otherwise noted, are excerpted from my conversations with Hall on December 30, 1972, in Houston, Texas, and on November 14-16, 1973, in Austin, Texas.

1. "She Gave Her Heart to Jethro," © Copyright 1972 by Hallnote Music Company. Used by permission.
2. Dixie Deen, "Tom T. Hall's Touch of Greatness," *Music City News*, 5, no. 2 (August, 1967), 3.
3. "The Year That Clayton Delaney Died," © Copyright 1971 by Newkeys Music, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
4. "The Little Lady Preacher," © Copyright 1971 by Newkeys Music, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
5. Deen, "Touch of Greatness," p. 3; Jay Ehler, "Tom T. Hall: A Tale of Bad Zippers and Good Breaks," *Country Music*, 1, no. 1 (September, 1972), 36.
6. Patrick Carr, comp., "Stories about the Storyteller: Tom T. Hall," *Country Music*, 1, no. 10 (June, 1973), 27.
7. "Kentucky, Feb. 27, '71," © Copyright 1971 by Newkeys Music, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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22. "Last Hard Town," © Copyright 1973 by Hallnote Music Company. Used by permission.
23. "Too Many Do-Goods," © Copyright 1973 by Hallnote Music Company. Used by permission.
24. "Joe, Don't Let Your Music Kill You," © Copyright 1973 by Hallnote Music Company. Used by permission.

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Johnny Rodriguez

ANN MALONE AND BILL C. MALONE

Juan Raul "Johnny" Rodriguez is rapidly emerging as one of the most talented of the new breed of young country music singers. He is also the first Chicano to become a national star. Despite his Texas affiliations, Johnny's popularity has not been confined to that region. Concert tours in England and Canada attest to his international recognition, while appearances at Carnegie Hall and on such network television shows as "Midnight Special," "Wide World of Entertainment," and "Adam-12" (in which he played a dramatic role), as well as on such basic country shows as "Hee Haw" and "Good Ole Nashville Music," illustrate the national base of his appeal.

Rodriguez has been called a Chicano Charley Pride, but actually his cultural identity has probably been more important than his ethnic identity in making him the person and performer he is today. Rodriguez was born into a culture which may not be often articulated but which is known and recognized by almost anyone who has spent a lifetime in the Southwest, and particularly in southwest Texas. In that area, there has long been a blending of the frontier Anglo culture with the Mexican-American culture, a hybridization which has taken place since the first Anglo settlers, Spanish priests and soldiers, and Indian natives began to occupy that vast land together (and not always peacefully). The result has been a broad culture shared by almost all long-time inhabitants of the region, including Anglos, Chicanos, many blacks, and some central European groups, such as Polish and German-Americans. This broad culture comes partly from having lived together for