

A COUNTRY BOY CALLED BOBBY



How does a kid go from first violin in the Midland High School Orchestra to performing on stage at the Grand Ole Opera? It helps to have a little luck and a passion for country music but even more to be considered one of the best versatile musicians in Nashville.

Bobby Randall (my dad is Bob, please call me Bobby) also credits his parents for giving him the musical nurturing to become great and being his biggest fans. “They never pushed me but gave me as many opportunities as possible,” said Randall. “They’re rare birds – still married after 57 years and still out there performing when they can.”

His dad supported the family by playing in a band five nights a week before becoming a truck driver and his mother was a school bus driver. Both now retired and living in Edenville, they are still an important part of Bobby’s life – one of the main reasons he’s still performing. Now it’s behind a microphone as a co-host of the “Morning Express” on 103 Country WGND-FM in Gladwin.

Randall grew up taking his guitar to elementary school and playing as often as he could. His first band was called the Wildwood Playboys,

which started around the 9th grade with several local friends. “I remember playing the Sanford Homecoming dance – that was a big deal for us,” Bobby recalled. “We moved on to wedding receptions and when I got old enough we hit the bar circuit.”

His high school years were spent perfecting his craft. The violin became the fiddle and the steel guitar was added to his resume.

A stint in the Army put music on hold but after returning home his dad got him into the Teamsters Union and he was on track to settle in to a good paying career driving 18-wheelers. “I was making \$15/hr. with benefits,” said Randall. “That was pretty good wages back in the mid-70’s and I was still playing music several nights a week.”

His second band, Freight Train, was a very popular progressive country band. “We had’em hanging out the doors at places like the Wooden Shoe and The Grove in Sanford.”

A big revelation came to him on a trip to Nashville. He listened to several of the better known musicians and thought ‘I can play with those guys.’ His opportunity to prove it came when he formed a backup group for country singer Don King, which prompted his shift from truck driver to Nashville musician.

That group evolved into the founding members of the band known as Sawyer Brown (named after the road where they rehearsed in Nashville). Sawyer Brown hit the honky tonk bars the same year the movie Urban Cowboy came out. “That movie really helped keep us busy,” said Randall. “Every town had a ‘cowboy’ bar with a mechanical bull, good-looking waitresses and a lot of cold beer.”

The band’s big break came with a shot at the limelight on a new TV show called Star Search in 1983. They ended up winning the whole enchilada worth \$100,000 and a record contract with Capitol Records. Sawyer Brown has become one of the most popular country bands still touring today.

Randall stayed until the early 90’s and eventually moved into television with a stint as host of a TV talent show called You Can Be A Star, work with TNN and reporting for Fox Sports. He’s still on the short list for playing with the biggest talents around and has now embarked on a new career in radio with WGDN-FM.

His easy voice, quick wit and extensive knowledge of the country music scene make his contributions to the morning radio show well worth listening to. He connects with the audience much like he did on stage

with Sawyer Brown. A chat with Bobby Randall gives you the feeling of having been friends for years.

ROR: You mentioned your parents being a great influence. Is that where the music came from?

Bobby: Without a doubt - I was one of those kids that made everyone groan. You know, when my dad would say from stage, 'let's have Bobby come up here with his guitar and play a few songs. Give the kid a big round of applause.' (laughing)

ROR: When did it occur to you that you were good enough to make a living at this?

Bobby: I thought I could play with most of the musicians I'd heard in Nashville. That's changed now (laughing). But I was versatile. I played the fiddle, steel guitar and could harmonize vocally. I also caught a break early playing steel and fiddle for Charlie Rich who was a big star back then.

ROR: Who were the groups/individuals that influenced you the most?

Bobby: I've always been drawn to group bands like Marshal Tucker, Alabama and the Charlie Daniels Band, probably because I'm not a lead singer. One of the coolest things in my life is going from idolizing someone like Charlie Daniels to being able to pick up the phone and talk with him. As a matter of fact, I did that just a few weeks ago and he invited me to come for a visit. He ended the call with 'and be sure to bring your guitar.'

ROR: Give us an idea of what a typical concert day was like for you.

Bobby: The day-to-day routine was not as glamorous as people think. When we got big we were on Life of the Rich & Famous and the Arsenio Hall Show but the tour was a tough grind. We called it 'hotel hopping.' You wake up when the bus rolled into a hotel parking lot. The driver would give us each a slip of paper – room number, lunch time, sound check, dinner, concert time and the time I had to be back in the hotel parking lot to leave for the next town. That went on for years.

ROR: So what was Star Search and Hollywood like?

Bobby: Oh, I was pretty wide-eyed those first few trips into Tinseltown. It started as kind of a joke but the longer we lasted it got unreal. Fifty million viewers watched us win the finals. One day we're playing a honky tonk bar where 500 is a big crowd – guys are getting

drunk, brawling and chasing the waitresses and we're pointed at the TV yelling THAT'S US! The first gig after we won 5000 people showed up. I'm saying 'who's playing' and they're saying YOU GUYS!

ROR: Who's in Bobby Randall's all-star band?

Bobby: On lead guitar, Johnny Highland – if I'm listening to him play and they were towing my car away I wouldn't move – that's how good he is. On rhythm guitar, I guess I could handle that. On bass, my good friend Don Breland, who played with the Oakridge Boys. Drums- probably not the greatest drummer, but I'm a big fan of Ringo Starr, hey it's my band, right (laughing). Steel Guitar- Paul Franklin. Mark Knofler of Dire Straits said in front of 70,000 screaming fans 'and now on steel guitar, the best player in the world', that's good enough endorsement for me. Male vocalist- Travis Tritt. I wish I could sing like that guy.

ROR: You also reported for Fox Sports. What were some of the things you covered?

Bobby: That was the most fun job I've ever had. I covered sports-related injuries. I did a story on jet boating, rodeo riders, the blue turf at Boise State's stadium and got to climb in the Grand Tetons. I'd do a story on Bo Jackson and then cover a high school player who had the same injury. I got to throw a dart at a map and go do a story.

ROR: Could you give some advice to the aspiring musicians out there?

Bobby: Choose a level that you feel comfortable performing at – there's nothing wrong with playing at the VFW hall or in a polka band or playing guitar and your biggest gig is the BT in Beaverton. But if you want to step out and make a footprint on the national scene you've gotta have that fire. If you don't have the fire, don't even try because it's a big challenge. If you go for it, surround yourself with good people.

ROR: Musicians are notorious for pulling pranks on each other. Can you share a few?

Bobby: We were touring with Kenny Rogers one summer and he arranged to have our bus driver arrested. Our bus was pulled over and the driver handcuffed when Kenny's entourage rolled by all laughing their butts off at us. Another time we were at the Indiana State Fair opening for the Beach Boys. There was one song where I played a nice long harmonica solo. When that bit came up I noticed them all standing on stage, which was unusual because they usually showed up just

before they had to go on. That alone should have tipped me off. I grabbed the harmonica from our stagehand and started to play until I realized they'd filled the harmonica with hot sauce!

ROR: What tunes are on your IPOD?

Bobby: Well, I'm basically technology challenged. Chris Schaffer, my co-host, is the professional on our show and does all the technical stuff – she's great. I'm the color commentator. I don't have an IPOD but I've got a ton of music CD's no one's ever heard yet. I listen to good songwriters and musicians before they become great. I listened to Mayberry (a big Rascal Flats hit) a thousand times until I was sick of it. Then it hits the airwaves and I'm stuck (laughing).

ROR: So I guess we're stuck with you for a while...but this is a good thing! To use a musical term, it was great jamming with you. Thanks Bobby.

