



Jimmy Driftwood and Ralph Emery

In earlier columns, I've spoken of one of my songwriting inspirations, Jimmy Driftwood (1907-1998) of Mountain View, Arkansas. Driftwood is best known for writing **The Battle of New Orleans**, which was a huge hit for Johnny Horton in 1959, but he wrote thousands of songs, and knew scores of traditional pieces. I only saw him in person once, at a folk festival in Minnesota in the mid sixties. He was marvelous. I wish I had worked up the courage to talk with him then, or in the following years; he died in 1998.

Recently I came upon a 2003 interview by Dr. Brooks Blevins of Missouri State University, with a folk musician named Glen Branscum (1928-2011). Branscum, also of Mountain view, was a lifelong friend and traveling companion of Jimmy Driftwood. He helped build and was manager, since Driftwood's death, of the Jimmy Driftwood Barn, a museum and music performance hall in Mountain View.

In this interview, Mr. Branscum explains that Nashville radio DJ Ralph Emery helped to bring Jimmy Driftwood's **Battle of New Orleans** to the attention of Johnny Horton:

Johnny Horton... Well, he was going somewhere to perform that night... Ralph Emery, he put that on his radio program that night, and it was late in the night... He thought, 'Well, it had hell and damn in it,' you know, and that's the reason the radio people, the disc jockeys, wouldn't play it... So Ralph Emery just put it on there anyhow. Johnny Horton, he heard it and heard Jimmy sing it, and... He called old Ralph Emery up and said, "I gotta get this one..."

I've been a fan of Ralph Emery's interviews for years, first when he was host of the Nashville Network's **Nashville Now**, and more recently on the weekly **Ralph Emery Live** on RFD-TV, though his broadcasting career stretches way back to 1951. In 2007 he was inducted

into the Country Music Hall of Fame.

I sent a thank-you email to Mr. Emery in August. I realized that had it not been for his courage as a DJ, I never may have been inspired by Driftwood, and hence may not have become a songwriter.

To my delight, Ralph Emery wrote back:

Peter, Jimmy Driftwood once told me that the song evolved out of an old square dance call. All he had to start with was "We fired our guns and the British came a coming." Did you also know that Columbia records in the interest of profits had Horton re-record the song for the British and Canadian markets. In the revised version THE BRITISH WON THE BATTLE... How's that for greed. When Jimmy heard about it he went to Andy Jackson's grave and cried for forgiveness tho he had nothing to do with it. Just thought you would like these side bars. All the best, Ralph Emery

I had no idea! Rewriting a song and rewriting history at the same time! Driftwood must have freaked. I wrote and thanked Mr. Emery again and asked if I could quote him in WZ. He replied,

Peter...I don't mind being quoted... I believe the second version is in a Johnny Horton boxed set. New lines..."In 1814 we took a little trip along with Colonel Packer up the mighty Mississippi. We took a little bacon and we took a little beans and we met the blooming rebels in the town of New Orleans." Both versions said, "We fired our guns and the (British or Rebels, take your pick) kept a coming, But there wasn't nigh as many as there was a while ago." Since the rebels were defending against the advancing British, that line got dicey. Andy Jackson is buried here in Nashville at his Hermitage mansion. Remember, Jimmy Driftwood was a history teacher and invested a lot of his soul in this song... Hope this helps. Best, Ralph Emery

Again I expressed my gratitude, and Mr. Emery wrote this final explanation and clarification of the situation:

*Peter. Let me tell you a story. Don Warden is the publisher of "The Battle of New Orleans." He sold the foreign rights to Wesley Rose of the Acuff-Rose publishing company. Wesley took the idea of a British version to Mitch Miller, then head of A and R at Columbia records. Without telling Don or Jimmy Driftwood they took Horton into a studio and made the record for the Canadian and British markets. By the time Don heard about it was too late. Don also said, to his embarrassment, they put his name on it as co-writer. Bottom line—The record stiffed. Did not do well at all. I suppose the public thought the whole idea was silly. By the way—Don Warden was an original member of the Porter Waggoner trio. When Porter and Dolly split Don went with Dolly as her road manager. Tho no longer her road manager, he still works as head of her Nashville operation. A really nice guy. It was Don who first heard that Johnny Horton was looking for a follow up to [his 1958 hit] **When it's Springtime in Alaska** and sent the Driftwood song to Johnny and his manager Tillman Franks. They turned it down. Finally, when they realized the song was in my top ten at WSM they changed their minds about the song's potential. Because Columbia records sensed a trend, they released **Soldiers Joy** by Hawkshaw Hawkins, **10 thousand drums** by Carl Smith and **Ballad Of the Blue and Grey** by Lefty Frizzell. None of them were hits. As Paul Harvey would say, THAT'S THE REST OF THE STORY. Best, Ralph Emery*

All goes to show that "sensing a trend" was no easier then than it is now, also that a song is rarely popular just because of its theme; it has to be a good song.

It was a heady excitement for me to receive these personal emails from one person I admire so much regarding another person I admire so much. My deep thanks to Ralph Emery for taking the time to send me these fascinating notes. Hats off too to Brooks Blevins and Glen Branscum and, of course, Jimmy Driftwood.

--WZ Nov '12

LINKS

RFD-TV's Ralph Emery Live:

www.rfdtv.com/shows/music_&_entertainment/ralph_emery_live/
Brooks Blevins' interview of Glen Branscum about Jimmy Driftwood:
web.lyon.edu/groups/mslibrary/rcol/branscum.htm

Also, do Google, YouTube, and Amazon searches for Jimmy Driftwood.