

## Jimmy Webb: Every hit song is a 'miracle'

Songwriter to sing, share stories behind "MacArthur Park," "Highwayman," more



Entertainment  
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To comprehend the mathematical improbability of Jimmy Webb's career as a writer of chart-topping songs, envision a 14-year-old kid perched atop a tractor in the Oklahoma Panhandle circa 1961.

That's where Webb first heard country singer Glen Campbell. The warm voice emanated from a transistor AM radio dangling from an umbrella, beckoning with the lyrics of its title, "Turn Around, Look at Me."

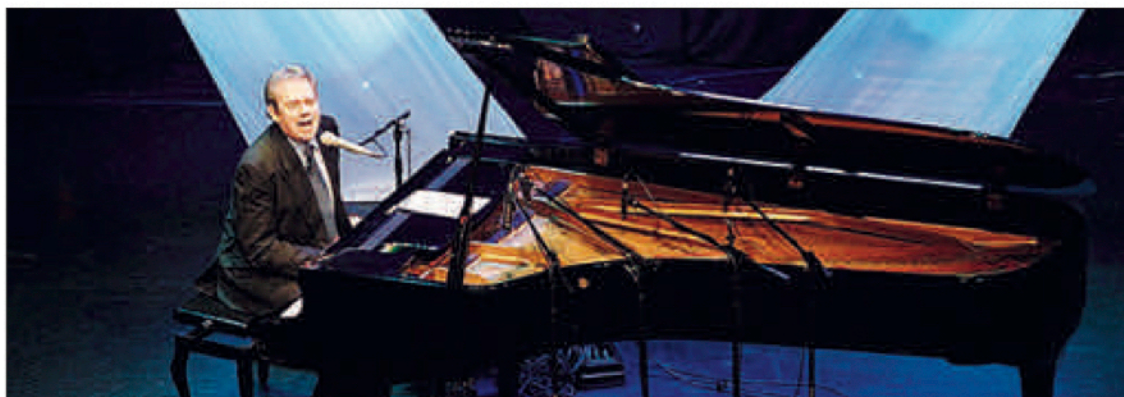
Those words might as well have come from a parted sky. Webb, who had begun writing on piano at 13, could only dream of the possibilities.

"I want somebody like that to sing my songs," he remembers thinking while harrowing wheat.

Webb, who will perform and share anecdotes June 16 at the Riverside Hotel's Sapphire Room in Boise, didn't have to wait long. Six years later, Campbell record-

ed Webb's song "By the Time I Get to Phoenix." Around the same time, Webb scored a smash with "Up, Up and Away" by The 5th Dimension, which took Record of the Year and Song of the Year awards at the 1968 Grammys. And he'd already written the unmistakable "MacArthur Park." That song — about a "cake left out in the rain" — eventually became the first No. 1 single for disco queen Donna Summer, not to mention the worst song ever recorded, according to humor writer Dave Barry's "Book of Bad Songs."

Webb actually did witness picnickers with cakes in Los Angeles' MacArthur Park, he says, which is where he used to spend time with a



Jimmy Webb calls his journey from a kid in Oklahoma to a hit-making songwriter "stuff that dreams were made of."

girlfriend: "There's nothing in that song that I did not physically see with my own eyes."

Now 67, Webb sounds equally amazed and amused by his life's path. I spent nearly an hour with him on the phone, and I gladly would have spent another. His Boise show should be entertaining not just for the classic music, but for the stories.

It was sheer fate that Webb's father, a Southern Baptist minister, moved the family cross country to California for a church job. The

West Coast location opened the door to the music industry for the eager, teenage songwriter. When Webb's dad decided to move the family back home to Oklahoma, the 17-year-old stayed.

"I'll never forget the confrontation when we stood by the same old station wagon, and I said, 'Dad, I'm not going back to Oklahoma. There's no way I can possibly do that,'" Webb says. "He tried to talk me out of that a couple of times, and then finally he reached into his pocket and he said, 'Son, I've only

got 44 dollars, but here it is.'"

Webb's first job was with Motown Records, where he wrote dozens of songs and learned how to make records. Achieving this kind of success at such a young age seems crazy, but Webb quickly mentions modern names such as the Jonas Brothers and Justin Bieber. "There's always been a demand for young people."

Songs poured out of Webb — three or four a week — and he

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became a sought-after songwriting prodigy. But as a singer, Webb never sold many albums. "I think one of my records might have sold 20,000 to 25,000 copies," he says. "In those days, it was chump change."

Still, recording songs increased the odds that they would be heard and covered by someone famous. "The Moon is a Harsh Mistress," sung by Campbell, as well as

Joe Cocker, and "Highwayman," a No. 1 country hit for The Highwaymen, both came from Webb albums.

"I used to refer to them disparagingly as expensive demos," he says. "And it worked out that way a lot of times."

Anecdotes undoubtedly will flow at Webb's concert. Here are a few samples:

► "Highwayman" was the inspiration for the name of the supergroup of Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, Waylon Jennings and Johnny Cash. Webb's lyrics are

about a soul at four different points in time and space: a highwayman, a sailor, a dam builder and a starship captain. Webb never envisioned the four verses being sung by four people. Campbell recorded it, then a twist of fate led the tune into a room with the men who would become The Highwaymen. Famously, Cash sings the last verse.

"I just want to point out that it wasn't really my fault that Johnny Cash became an astronaut," Webb says.

► Webb wrote

"MacArthur Park" for pop group The Association — hurriedly. Producer "Bones" Howe had told him pretty much exactly what he wanted, Webb says.

"It was basically on a Monday, and (Howe said) 'The band will be finishing their album on a Friday.'"

"It's like, OK, get it done by Friday or it doesn't matter. That train will be out of the station by Friday."

The Association turned it down. And the metaphoric lost-love lyrics have been much maligned over the years. Webb admits he wishes he'd spent more time putting, well, icing on that cake, so to speak.

"I think that I could have just saved myself a lot of grief by just really probably paying a little bit more attention to that song," he says. "But I was in a hurry."

Besides, who cares if some newspaper funnyman made fun of it?

"I don't really concern myself with Dave Barry,"

shrugs Webb, who now serves as chairman of the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

► Webb cranked out "Wichita Lineman," also recorded by Campbell, in a day — and never actually finished it. Campbell had asked him for another song like "By the Time I Get To Phoenix."

Musicians were waiting in the studio. So Webb wrote enough to send over to the impatient band to see if he was on the right track — and never heard back.

He ran into Campbell days later and said, "Well, I guess you guys didn't like that 'Wichita Lineman' song."

"'Wichita Lineman?' We cut that," Campbell responded.

"I said 'No! It wasn't finished!'"

"It is now," Campbell said. "Instead of a third verse, there's now a big fat Duane Eddy guitar solo," Webb says. "And now you listen to it, and you can't really imagine any lyrics being there. So this is kind of predestination."

"It's awesome really, because it's like if this record would have been cut on any other day and if there'd been any other musician in the room, and if it had been 10 degrees hotter, it wouldn't have turned out to be a hit. There's just too many variables."

Having a song pour from a human mind onto paper, then become a hit — well, the odds are almost as long as a preacher's son from

Oklahoma winding up in L.A. writing those hits.

"I think every hit record is a miracle," Webb says. "It's a miracle! Because you change any one thing, you change the way it was mixed, and mix the drums down a little bit lower, not so high, it's not a hit."

"It's one of the places where I do get kind of metaphysical about records. Because I think that it's very odd that certain records are hits and certain other records written by great writers, sung by great singers, recorded by great producers, in the same studios, don't become hits."

"What's the difference? It's in the details, like the old saying goes."

Here are a few more details: Jimmy Webb, 7:30 p.m. June 16, Riverside Hotel, 2900 W. Chinden Blvd. \$35 general/\$45 preferred. www.brownpapertickets.com. Opening: Andy Byron, Gayle Chapman

### TONIGHT IN 'THE OTHER STUDIO'

Along with co-host Tim Johnstone, I'll spin new music by Jenny Lewis, Parquet Courts, The New Pornographers and more. "The Other Studio" airs at 9 p.m. Sunday on 94.9 FM The River.

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