

EVERYTHING'S STILL BEAUTIFUL

Ray Stevens' memorable hit songs range from the wacky "The Streak" to the poignant "Everything Is Beautiful"—and he's still makin' great music.

STORY BY KIP KIRBY

In 1957, *Leave It to Beaver* was making its TV debut, a postage stamp cost three cents, and George Strait was 5 years old. "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" gyrated Jerry Lee Lewis onto the national radio charts—and Ray Stevens cut his first record in Nashville. If you think it's hard to believe that was 52 years ago, just ask Ray. He can't believe it, either.

"A lot of events seem like they just happened yesterday," declares Ray, who has to be gently prodded to reminisce about his half-century career. Kicking back in his newly remodeled studio/office complex on Nashville's Music Row, he'd much rather talk about today and how he's busier than he ever was—writing songs, recording albums, making videos, running a publishing company, even touring with his eight-piece group of musicians and singers. At 70, Ray has the energy and looks of a man far younger—and he shows no signs of slowing down.

His latest album project, *One for*

the Road, is a collection of songs Ray geared toward truck drivers who spend long hours alone in their cabs, rolling down the highways and flipping CDs into their players like coins in a slot machine. The idea came to him from his record label distributor, who not only suggested the title but sold the idea to Pilot Travel Centers as an exclusive summer promotion. The album goes into general release after Labor Day.

"About that time, I was talking to Aaron Tippin about an album he was doing for truckers," Ray recalls, "and Aaron named off all the songs like 'Six Days on the Road' that he was planning to cut. So I decided maybe I'd better stay with 'people tunes.' Truckers are people, not just drivers—and I had some great new material from some of my writers I thought they'd like."

One for the Road features 15 songs, including two co-written by Ray and three of his biggest comedy hits: "The Streak," "Mississippi Squirrel Revival" and "It's Me Again, Margaret." The CD also showcases "Hang Up and Drive," a paean to inconsiderate motorists who yak on their

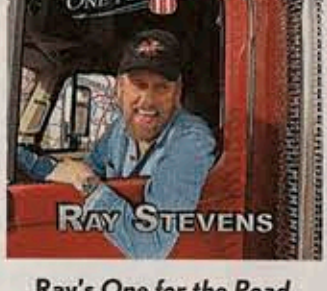


Ray in 1973

cellphones and create traffic hazards; "Convoy," a remake of C.W. McCall's 1975 trucker anthem; "Jack Daniels, You Lied to Me Again" (which manages to sneak in several other male whiskey names) and the rollicking, feel-good, gospel-tinged "Right Reverend Roadhog McGraw," delivered by Ray in his finest comedy tradition.

One of Ray's favorite cuts on the album is "Cooter Brown," which tells the supposedly true tale of a man in the Civil War who had one brother fighting for the North and the other brother fighting for the South. Since he didn't want to be drafted and have to fight either brother, Cooter opted to stay drunk as a skunk for the duration of the war. Tipping his hat to legend, Ray even serves up his take on the Don Gibson country chestnut "Oh Lonesome Me."

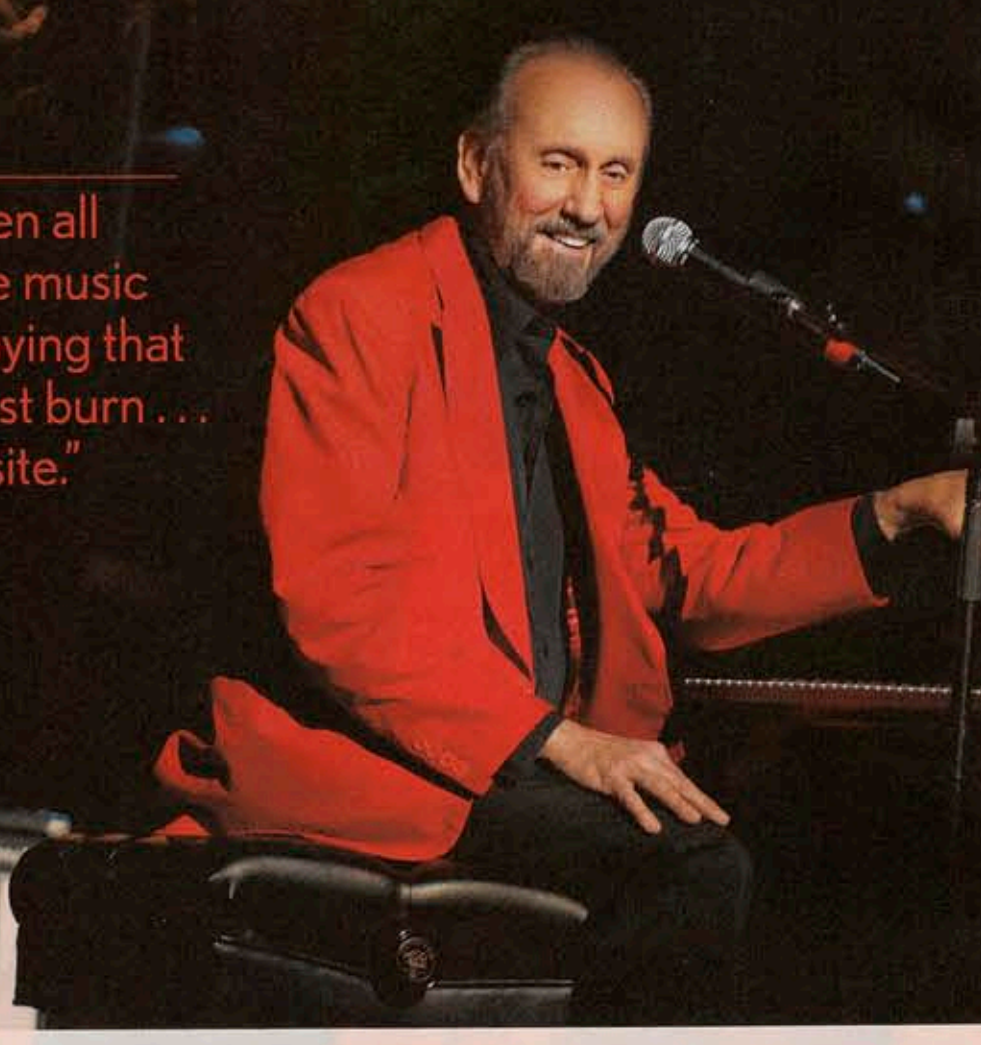
Ray's career might have been much different had his mother not insisted her son take piano lessons at the age



Ray's *One for the Road* album salutes truckers.

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"I remember when all the experts in the music business were saying that comedy was a fast burn... it's just the opposite."



RAY STEVENS CONTINUED

of 6. "I wanted to be outside playing baseball with the other boys, and the only way she'd let me was if I would practice an hour a day on the piano." He laughs. "I'm glad she made me do it now. I'd have made a lousy baseball player."

His earliest recollection of performing came around the age of 12 when he showed up at a local television studio near his home in Georgia. Ray played piano and sang before an audience—and was hooked.

At the time, Ray still went by his given name of Ragsdale. But when he came to Nashville to begin his recording career at Capitol Records, now-legendary producer Ken Nelson didn't like the way his name sounded. "Perkers was famous for changing performers' names," Ray recalls. "He changed Jerry Reed

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Ray and fellow funnyman George Lindsey in 1998

Hubbard's name to Jerry Reed, and made James Loden become Sonny James. When he told me my name wasn't 'showbizzy' enough, I said, 'If you change my name, you'll make my mother mad.' Ken asked, 'What's your mother's maiden name?' I told him Stevens. He said, 'OK, that's a good

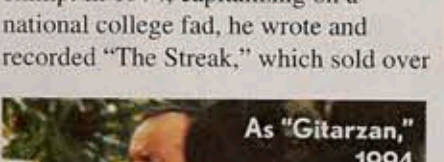
enough name.' I said, 'If you change it to that, you'll make my father mad!' He looked at me and said, 'Well, we can't make everybody happy—you want to cut a record or not?' I said 'Yes, sir,' and I was Ray Stevens after that."

With his musical talent and ability to create humorous and memorable characters in song, Ray's career took off. In 1960, he had his first hit record—well, almost. Recalls Ray, "I cut a record called 'Sgt. Preston of the Yukon,' and it took off like gangbusters. It was doing great. But we had to pull it off the market. Seems I'd neglected to get permission from King Pictures Syndicate, which owned the rights to the *Sergeant Preston* franchise. Their lawyers sent me a cease and desist order for copyright infringement."

"It broke my heart to have to kill that record. But it gave me a clue. The next

song I recorded was 'Jeremiah Peabody's Poly Unsaturated Quick Dissolving Fast Acting Pleasant Tasting Green and Purple Pills.' That was in 1961 and it went to around 35 on the national charts. Then came 'Ahab the Arab' the next year, and that started it all."

In 1969, Ray exploded onto the national pop charts with his wildly entertaining single "Gitarzan," a Top 10 record that showcased his uncanny ability to mimic voices—male, female or chimp. In 1974, capitalizing on a national college fad, he wrote and recorded "The Streak," which sold over



As "Gitarzan," 1994

a million copies and made Ray Stevens a household name. Over the years, he continued to make listeners laugh with topically influenced tunes like "Shriner's Convention," "Mississippi Squirrel Revival," "Osama-Yo' Mama," and "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex."

Yet there was also a serious side to Ray's music. In 1970, "Everything Is Beautiful," a song he wrote for his TV show (a summer replacement for *The Andy Williams Show*) soared to the top of the pop charts and won him the Best Male Pop Vocal Performance

Grammy award that year. Five years later, Ray scored a second Grammy for his arrangement of the jazz standard "Misty." In 1980, he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Today, 25 million album and four million vinyl sales later, Ray stays busy overseeing writing and recording projects for his Clyde Records label. He and his staff work out of the studio/office complex on Music Row. "I love recording—it's my favorite thing to do," he explains. "I've always made records. I can't imagine life without a studio in it. I'm an entertainer. It's how I see myself."

Ray sold his namesake theater in Branson, Mo., in 2006 to concentrate on other projects and interests closer

from the Guantanamo naval base in Cuba. "I tried to show my political leanings because I happen to share Hannity's views," Ray explains, "but do it in a way that was believable for people who see me as a piano player and a teller of jokes." He enjoyed the experience enough to follow it up with a booking on the *Huckabee* show.

For a man with five decades of success behind him, Ray is understandably reluctant to apply the brakes. "I remember when all the experts in the music business were saying that comedy was a fast burn," he reflects. "But turns out, as a matter of fact, it's just the opposite. People remember comedy songs that made

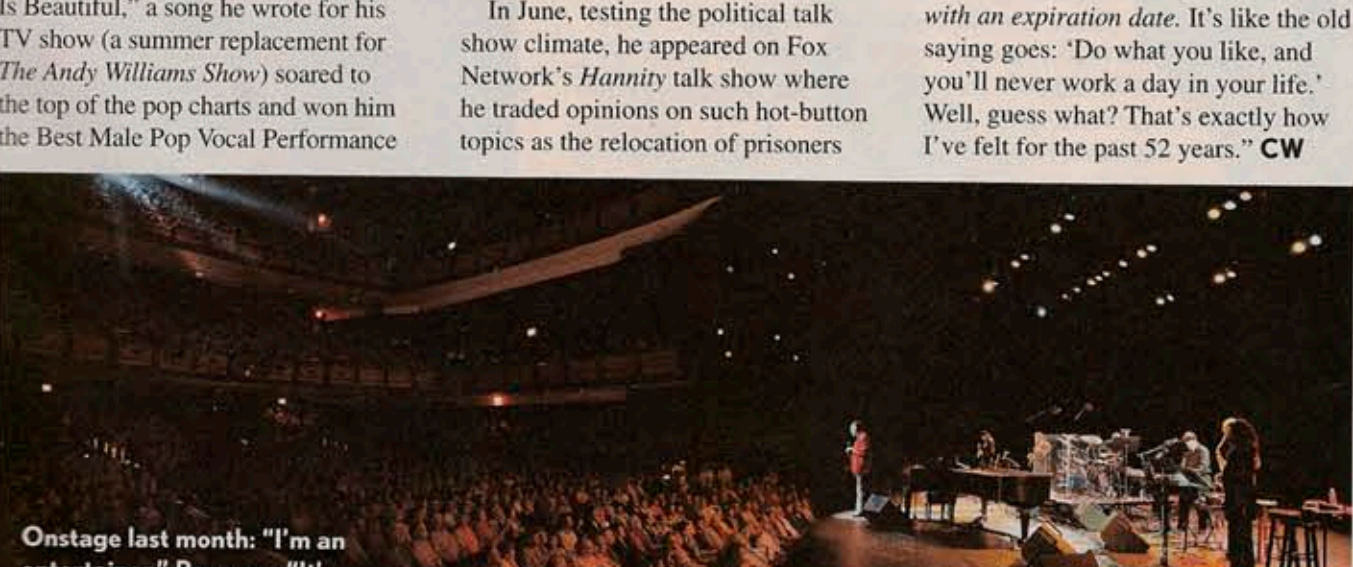
"People remember comedy songs that made them laugh a lot longer than they remember some of the love songs that were popular at the same time."

to home. He's currently writing and shopping an original comedy sitcom called *We Ain't Dead Yet*. The show takes place in a retirement home for aging country entertainers and follows the antics of a wacky cast of characters played by pals Louise Mandrell, Ralph Emery, Beverly and George "Goober" Lindsey, among others. Guest stars expected to appear include Bobby Bare and George Jones.

In June, testing the political talk show climate, he appeared on Fox Network's *Hannity* talk show where he traded opinions on such hot-button topics as the relocation of prisoners

them laugh a lot longer than they remember some of the love songs that were popular at the same time."

As the interview winds down and Ray gets ready to head back into the studio, he pauses and adds, "There's a song on the new CD called 'Never Too Late.' I didn't write it, but it pretty much [exemplifies] my philosophy to the hilt. It says, *It's never too late to be great / There's never been a dream with an expiration date*. It's like the old saying goes: 'Do what you like, and you'll never work a day in your life.' Well, guess what? That's exactly how I've felt for the past 52 years." **CW**



Onstage last month: "I'm an entertainer," Ray says. "It's how I see myself."

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