

BILLY JOE ROYAL

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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When Billy Joe Royal recorded the 1965 debut pop hit, "*Down In The Boondocks*," the Georgia singer/songwriter had no idea he'd top the country charts twenty years later with the 1985 smash, "*Burn Like A Rocket*."

"I never thought I was going to have another hit record," says Royal, who will perform at Nashville North USA on Saturday.

Royal grew up in a musical family and listened to a variety of styles on the Georgia radio stations.

"I was really lucky to always be around music as a kid," Royal says. "My uncle had a band, my grandmother played, my whole family played. And the local radio stations would play three or four different formats a day. You'd get a country thing during the afternoon, then black gospel until sundown and at night you'd get rhythm and blues. It was just the best thing ever."

Royal appeared on his uncle's radio show in his hometown of Valdosta, Ga., at the age of eleven.

By fourteen, Royal became a regular on the Friday night Atlanta-based radio show, "Georgia Jubilee," with the likes of Ray Stevens, Jerry Reed, Joe South, Freddy Weller and various Grand Ole Opry stars.

When the Georgia Jubilee broke up, Royal landed a job at the Bamboo Ranch in Savannah, Ga.

"It was a huge club," Royal says. "We played six nights a week, five hours a night. We had some big name R&B and country acts play there like Roy Orbison, Fats Domino, The Isley Brothers, Sam Cooke, Ray Price, Marty Robbins and George Jones. It was just a great place to learn and develop your voice."



After releasing a few local singles that failed to take off, Royal became a hot national commodity with the Joe South penned tune, "*Down In The Boondocks*."

"The first thing I did of any consequence after *Boondocks* hit is tour with 'The Dick Clark Cavalcade of Stars,'" Royal says. "We did a show every night for 3 months straight with stars like Tom Jones, Neil Diamond and The Shirelles. I felt like a fan most of the time. Here I was touring with all these wonderful people that I'd heard on the radio and all of a sudden we were becoming friends. It was great."

Royal released nine pop singles from 1965-1978 including, "I Knew You When," "I've Got To Be Somebody" and "Cherry Hill Park."

"I was working and still doing okay financially after the pop career slowed down," Royal says. "But record-wise I was doing nothing. So I moved back to Georgia, started coming to Nashville and eventually cut the country single, *Burned Like A Rocket*. It struggled for about half a year on an independent label until Atlantic Records picked it up. It became a Top Ten country single and started a whole new career for me."

Royal continues to make his mark on country music with a self-proclaimed "hodge-podge" of career influences and over a dozen singles including, "I'll Pin A Note On Your Pillow," "Tell It Like It Is" and "Till I Can't Take It Anymore."

"I really think your musical identity is obtained when you're young," says the Georgia Music Hall of Fame inductee. "I've had the fortunate opportunity to work with a lot of great singers over the years. They'd come into town and then I'd do their songs after they left. You steal a little bit from everybody and then add your own individual touch along the way. That makes up what you are."