

A little bit country, and a little bit educational | Songwriter's Corner with Marshall Mitchell

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By Steve Butler
Ox Cart Music

Marshall Mitchell got his musical start early at age 13.

He performed in and around North Central Texas and South Central Oklahoma, for school functions, private parties, civic gatherings and church activities until high school graduation.

He then joined the U.S. military. After a four-year stint, which included Vietnam, Taiwan, Japan, Philippines and Okinawa, he was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps in Southern California.

He traveled the coffeehouses and clubs of Southern California. The college campuses and small concert scenes enriched Mitchell's educational career, helping hone his stage presence and expand his base for my songwriting and storytelling.

He settled in Northwest Arkansas in the late 1980's.

He continues to travel and perform at a variety of events, such as clubs, fraternity/sorority parties, weddings, business after hours functions, private parties and such.

"The children's presentations have become my life blood and my life's work." he said.

Visit the [Marshall Mitchell](#) web-site to view other pictures, concert information, current and upcoming projects, songs and videos.

How did you start writing songs?

Setting: 3rd Grade. I was very quiet and very shy and very reserved, as you might imagine.

One day, I realized, I had a double big crush on this cute girl in my class. (This was very strange to me because, at that time in my life, I didn't think I liked girls very much at all) I also didn't have a clue as to how to go about telling her! What would I ever do if she rejected me, or laughed at me in front of the entire class? Would all the other boys make fun of me for liking a girl? It was too much pressure for a 3rd grader!

That night, I sat in my room and poured out my feelings in a little poem, to her. I exclaimed how beautiful I thought she was, how wonderful our lives could be together, and how she could make my world so much better ... if only she felt the same about me. I emptied my soul in every line, offering my boundless love and admiration for her.

The next day I waited for an opportunity to slip the note to her, strangely, without her knowing it was ME that wrote it. (Even though I was struck dumb with all the love a 3rd grader could possess, I was, very quiet and very shy, especially about matters of the heart as it pertained to girls)

Finally my opportunity came. I pretended to drop something on the floor, so I could be last in line, and as we filed out of class for lunch. I placed it on her desk, smiling to myself.

I knew she would find it and read it and be swept off her feet, when we returned. Somehow, during lunchtime, the teacher had found the folded note. Upon our return, read it loud and clear, to the entire class.

It wasn't too difficult to know which red-faced boy had written it. I suffered through the rest of the day with, seemingly everyone turning and snickering at me. I vowed, inside myself, to somehow throw myself into a stampeding herd of wide-eyed longhorn cattle before the next school day.

How could I return to this place? The bell rang and we were out of class. I was history....good bye life!!

While walking home, my mind was ablaze with plans of escape; the circus, the Foreign Legion, even go live with gypsies (if I could find any).

Suddenly, from the out of the fog this same cute girl came up behind me and slide her hand into mine. When she looked into my eyes and smiled ... I realized the pen, written with the ink of the heart, was a powerful combination.

I knew, then and there, I was destined to become a writer.

Do you consider yourself a songwriter? At what point did you cross that bridge?



Since my experience, in the 3rd grade, I knew I could make an impact on other people's feelings with my words. My 13th birthday came with a red & black Silvertone guitar and a Mel Bay Chord book.

That and four Johnny Cash albums from my folk's collection and I was the star of my room!!!

It wasn't too long after I had almost mastered C – F – & G that I began making up little lyrical jingles. Willie Nelson's "Blackjack County Chain" was the first song I learned and performed for the neighborhood.

I was reminded, at my last High School reunion (40 years later) that I had taken that melody and added my own lyrics.

Long forgotten (I probably have those words in some spiral notebook packed away somewhere in my childhood treasures....such as they are) was probably my very first songwriting attempt.

Words and melodies have always come very easy for me. Sometimes the rhyme is there and I fiddle around on the old guitar until I find a matching melody; sometimes the tune comes and I fit the words to the meter.

I performed in a country group all during my High School years and after graduation and enlistment in the military service, purchased and carried and left an old Fender acoustic somewhere over in SE Asia. I shared a lot of feelings with that old guitar.

Sometimes, it may have been the only thing that kept my reality in check! I wrote a lot in those days.

When my tour was over and I returned back to “The World,” I began my college days in Southern California. I quickly discovered the coffee-house scene and began sharing my original (and some cover) tunes.

Some weekends we’d load up the car and hit the road. Sometimes North, sometimes South. From San Diego to San Mateo, we trekked on a regular basis. I was majoring in “Extra Curricular Activities (after all). One of my classes was “Songwriting Techniques.”

I can still remember the day a fellow classmate, named Fred Fields (who had a full-blown album out at the time...that, to me, was “Big Time” back then) point at me and tell a group of people he had been talking to and said “He writes good country songs.”

It made me feel good about myself. I guess I had known it all along but that was a defining moment in my writing life. I WAS a recognized songwriter.

How do you write songs and why do you do it?

I’m sure if you asked a thousand different songwriters there would probably be a thousand different answers. For me, it is a way to express the feelings that are constantly changing and adapting inside me.

What are you working on now?

I continue to perform Marshall Mitchell “Cowboy music for Kids” concerts, as well as various clubs, private parties, festivals, house concerts and such, as requested.

I currently am performing “Watershed” concerts at our local schools, as well. I had written 6 songs for the Illinois River Watershed Partnership, back in 2010. They produced them in a CD as part of a package to be taken to elementary schools within our watershed area.

Since March of 2010, we have taken the concert to 20 schools in the Illinois River and White River watershed area; performing for over 6000 students and teachers. Currently we have 7 additional schools booked and another 8 pending.

During the coming summer I will perform the “Watershed” concert at 6 Public Libraries for the “Summer Reading Program.”

Also, during 2010, we filmed, edited and produced an educational music DVD, of the 6 songs, as an extension of the CD. We will begin delivering the DVD to the teachers and principals of the schools we have already performed at during the months of April and May 2011.

The songs have been such a hit ... the Illinois River Watershed Partnership has produced an illustrated songbook that will include the CD. This songbook will be debuted and distributed to the kids that attend the upcoming “Clean Water Rainger” Watershed Festival.

In addition to my work, with the Watershed Partnership, I continue to book Marshall Mitchell shows (Children’s as well as Adult’s) in Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Iowa.

I am currently working to find enough time to complete my 5th, independently released, CD album, I am calling “Marsh-Mellow.”

It will include my tunes written from the road and the feelings that accompany the miles and miles of blacktop. I want new listeners to be introduced and familiar friends to get to know some of the other facets of the Marshall Mitchell character.

What do you think makes a great song great?

The great songs, to me, have been the songs that have grabbed a’hold of something inside me and made me “feel” it. Whether they are funny or sad, fast or slow...it is the emotion of the moment that slams my reality onto the table and I can’t look away ... I don’t want to pull away. It has a way of telling me something I already knew but wasn’t fully aware of. I could relate to what the lyrics said.

Sometimes it’s in the words; sometimes it’s in the melody; sometimes it’s all in the presentation. It’s the lingering smell right after a rain; it’s the lingering feeling right after a child laughs; it’s smoke rings you can see but can never touch....we have the urge to experience the sensation those songs allows us to experience, over and over again. It gives me a yearning for the re-experience.

A great song can be intertwined with some memorable event or set within a point in time in our lives. It relates to a time or place we hold in our “life memory files” as a moving, good or not good, experience....or can even be a perceived experience. Most all songs are crafted to evoke some sort of emotion within the masses....my opinion is....the great ones become an extension of the experiences we hold inside ourselves.

Getting a consensus on what is and what might not be known as a “great song” is as difficult as there are songs to consider. Still ... somehow, we know it when we hear it.

Who is another artist you really enjoy working with and why?

I have worked with a relatively small number of other artists in my musical career. Some folks are meant to be on a team while others are meant to walk alone. I love the sound of a group ... extra instrumentation; harmonies; camaraderie on stage; someone else to drive!!

Still, I am a one man band and enjoy it that way.

What makes a gig special?

First thing that comes to mind is...getting paid!!

Secondly, (and more seriously) is... I challenge myself, as a Singer/songwriter/performer/entertainer is making sure the folks, who have taken time out of their life to come see my stage antics and hear my musical presentation, leave the show with something they didn't come with. I have often used the analogy with a salt shaker ... I want to take them; turn them; re-turn them and leave them with the feeling; satisfied they came, not wanting to have to leave and wanting more.....of me!! (of course!!)

Those special nights are crafted as much as the songs I sing or the stories I tell. It's as easy to recognize a sports performer that is giving everything they have as it is a musical performer in front of the crowd. It's hard work!!

It's hours and hours of practicing the words, the music, the sound, the lighting. It's constant experimenting in front of crowds to see what works and what might not!! In another analogy....It's pretty close to fishin', to me!! I throw out a song...if the crowd reacts, I go with it. If I don't get a positive reaction...I change “baits” and throw out something different until I hit on a direction that we all can ride on.

I have tried going by a “set list”...but have rarely been able to follow it. I like to get caught up in the flow of the show as much as I try and get the audience following along!! The first song is always the most difficult part of my gigs. I want to capture the audience right at the git-go!

It seems to me, we (as performers) crave that insatiable desire to be “loved” and “admired” and “sought after.” Those special gigs only happen when the work of the performer meets the want of the crowd. It's the two-hour rodeo, of sorts. When the chute gate opens and we are thrown out into the arena, sometimes on a wing and a prayer, to an uncertain ending. The secret, for me, is..... Believing in me and knowing my practice, preparation and presentation will keep me in the middle of the saddle...to the very end of that gig (ride).

When the buzzer sounds and time is up...everyone will be satisfied and celebrating the feeling of victory.....the crowd, for what they have received; the performer, for what they have given!!

What do most people not know about my career that may surprise them?

I am now, and have been since the mid-70's, a working musician. I have done other vocations at times, but always to support my music. Born in Texas, grew up in California, lived in Kansas City (both sides), and moved to Arkansas from Connecticut. My guitar, my songs and my stage presentation has taken me half way around the world and all across the United States; the radio, television, major concert performances, back yard birthday parties, elementary schools are in my musical history. I look toward the next horizon and wonder.....what I will get to do, today!!

I wouldn't trade any of it for a winning lottery ticket. It isn't the money or the fame; the recognition or the perks related to being some perceived "star".....it's the work!!

What question would I want to be asked about my music?

First and foremost, every time...."Would you be able to come perform for us at xyz??"
Answer..."Most definitely!! Let me check my calendar!"

Other than more opportunities for performance dates...I think the next question about my music would be:

"Where would you like to see your music take you in the future?" With today's technology in home studio recording, YouTube viewing availability, web-site information, TuneCore for music distribution, and any number of other avenues to get our music to the entire world...I would be just as satisfied earning a good living at my craft; some traveling (of course) but continuing to write and perform my style of music for the next twenty years, just as I've done it the last thirty. Then, we can talk about that winning lottery ticket!!!!