

Travis Wammack



Travis Wammack imagines some people may see him at a show and wonder what that old guy can do.

“Well, I just show ‘em,” he says.

Rolling Stone magazine’s Greg Shaw called Wammack, “the fastest guitar player I have ever heard in my life, and not just fast but good. Brilliant, even.”

Even at age 73, the legendary guitarist says the goal is always to make the next show better than the last.

Wammack was born in Walnut, Mississippi, to a large, poor family. When he was 8 years old and living in Memphis, Tennessee, his father brought home a guitar and asked if any of his children wanted to learn to play.

“He knew a few cowboy chords but that was about all he could show me,” Wammack adds. “There was no money for lessons so I taught myself.”

His career has humble beginnings, mostly playing in stores to earn a little money. By age 9, he was performing in beer joints.

“I’d stand by the jukebox and, before someone would drop in their nickel, I’d offer to play the song. Sometimes people would pay me just to see if I could really play.”

He met Eddie Bond, a rockabilly artist and DJ with a jamboree show on a top Memphis radio station, while walking down the street carrying his guitar. Bond stopped the 11-year-old boy and asked him to play a song. That was a huge break for “Little Travis.” He joined Bonds’ band and was opening for stars like Johnny Cash and Carl Perkins.

When the musician’s union heard

Wammack showing off a trophy won from his rattlesnack hunting hobby.

about Little Travis, they refused to let him play with union musicians. The boy was not a member and he was too young to join. "So, we got a lawyer. If I was going to keep playing with Bonds, I had to get in the union." Wammack became the youngest person to be voted into the musician's union.

In 1961, he joined producer Roland Janes as a session guitarist.

"When he asked me to come in and audition for him, I didn't know what to expect. Turns out, I was playing with Jerry Lee Lewis," Wammack says.

His work with Janes includes the song "Scratchy" which became a hit in England and made the U.S.



charts as well. The song also added to Wammack's reputation as a singular artist. "Scratchy" was the first time a guitarist used the fuzz tone.

"Here's a good story," Wammack laughs. "I was about 16 or 17 and Gibson had come out with their fuzz tone and they asked me to try it out. So, Daddy and me went down to the music store. It didn't sound anything like mine. I was cocky and said that I couldn't endorse theirs. Wow, can you imagine the money I passed up?"

Soon, Muscle Shoals was calling the young artist. Producer Rick Hall invited Wammack to FAME Studios where he recorded two albums of his own. At FAME, he worked on albums for Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, Bobbie Gentry and other iconic performers.

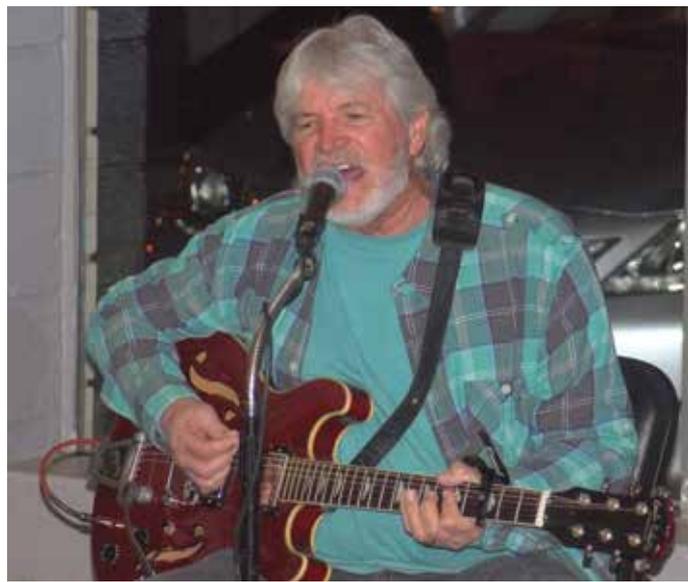
Other artists took note of Wammack's talent as well. The Beatles' George Harrison called to ask about Wammack's unique sound.

By 1969, Wammack had moved to Muscle Shoals to work with FAME Studios. "They made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

Little Richard came to FAME to record *The Rill Thing* album. Wammack played on the album and wrote the song "Greenwood Mississippi" for it. In 1984, Little Richard asked Wammack to put together a 'real southern band' and to serve as the band leader. He traveled with Little Richard for 10 years. While on tour in England, Wammack was invited to a BBC program where he learned one of his early records was among the top five collector's items in the country.

"They played it for me. Man, I was young then. I sounded like Brenda Lee."

Wammack's guitar work can be heard on records that have sold more than 60 million copies, and he's



released 13 albums of his own. He's been honored by six hall of fame organizations in the music industry. Guitarists like Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page credit Wammack as the inspiration to pursue their musical careers.

In 2006, he was included in a documentary recognizing legendary guitarists who play the Gibson EX series instrument. *Rolling Stone* magazine has grouped Wammack with self-styled performers like Elvis Presley and Narvel Felts — people who have made some of rock and roll's greatest records.

Wammack says it's not time to slow down yet. He works with Muscle Shoals Music Marketing and has added 'producer' to his list of accomplishments while helping young artists. He's also working on his next CD and still performs with his Snakeman Band.

Rally at the River in Florence, which benefits St. Jude's Hospital, is one performance he never passes up. He's been part of the musical lineup for 15 years, and rally organizers say it wouldn't be the same without him.

By Patricia Surrett, Editor ♦ Photos courtesy Colbert County Tourism