

MICKEY GILLEY

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
"Our Brown County" magazine
Nashville, IN
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Even though it's been 25 years since the "Urban Cowboy" movie made his Texas nightclub a household name, Mickey Gilley is still inspiring fans to "Stand By Me."

"My main intent when I perform on stage is to have a good time with the people," says Gilley, who will perform at The Little Nashville Opry on Saturday, July 30, at 6 pm and 9:30 pm. "I try to get them laughing a little bit, leave their problems and troubles at home, and just enjoy themselves."

Mickey Leroy Gilley grew up in Ferriday, La. and learned to sing and play the piano alongside his famous cousins -- rock 'n' roll star, Jerry Lee Lewis ("Great Balls of Fire") and tv/radio evangelist, Jimmy Swaggart.

"My mom, Irene, bought my first piano from money saved out of the \$18 a week she earned as a waitress," Gilley says.

When Jerry Lee Lewis hit the big time in 1957 with the #3 pop single, "Whole Lot of Shakin' Going On," it motivated Gilley to pursue a musical career of his own.

"I was laying sanitary storm sewer for the City of Houston when Jerry Lee first hit," Gilley says. "I thought to myself, 'If he can do it, so can I.' I didn't realize, at the time, that everyone would start comparing my style of music to him."

Gilley paid his dues and developed his own musical identity in the 60's by making regional recordings and playing the club circuit in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama.

Gilley first hit the country charts in '68 with the single, "Now I Can Live Again," followed by seventeen Billboard #1 country hits, including the Sammy Kaye cover, "Room Full of Roses," "Don't The Girls All Look Prettier At Closing Time," "A Headache Tomorrow (Or A Heartache Tonight)," and the Ray Charles cover, "You Don't Know Me."



"Room Full of Roses really turned things around for me," Gilley says. "I grew up singing that song with my cousins, Jerry Lee and Jimmy. I originally went into the studio to record "She Called Me Baby All Night Long," because a local businesswoman promised to put it in 350 jukeboxes in the area. I needed a song for the "B" side, so I recorded "Room Full Of Roses." The radio stations flipped the record over and played "Room Full Of Roses" instead, and it became my first No.1 single."

Gilley opened the world's largest honky-tonk, Gilley's Club, in Pasadena, Tx., in 1971, which later burned to the ground in 1989. Gilley's Club's have since been opened in Dallas and Las Vegas.

"I've had the pleasure of seeing a number of great country artists perform at Gilley's over the years," Gilley says.

Even though he still calls Pasadena his home, Gilley spends most of his time in Branson, Missouri, at his Mickey Gilley Theatre.

"This is my 15th year in Branson," Gilley says. "I do two shows a day, five days a week. My stage show in Branson includes the Urban Cowboy band, award-winning comedian Joey Riley, and the Urbanettes back-up singers, Kaci Bays and Katie Lynn."

Traveling between Missouri and Texas is easier these days, thanks to Gilley's twin-engine airplane.

"I'm a licensed pilot and have a commercial rating," Gilley says. "My interest in aviation began years ago when I lived in Houston. It took me six hours to drive home to see my parents, but only 2-1/2 hours to fly there. I guess you could say that saving time was the initial motivation in obtaining my pilot license. Even though I've had a pretty safe record over the years, I've jokingly adopted the aviation motto, 'any airplane landing you can walk away from is a good landing.'"

Gilley's Club first became nationally famous in 1978 when Esquire magazine published the Aaron Latham article, 'The Ballad of the Urban Cowboy: America's Search For True Grit,' resulting in the 1980 "Urban Cowboy" movie, starring John Travolta and Debra Winger.

"I was very disappointed in the article when it first came out," Gilley says. "At the time, I thought it degraded country music, because every other word was 'boy meets girl, twang, twang, twang.' And when they told me that Travolta was interested in starring in a movie version of the article, I thought, 'Oh no, they're going to film a Country Night Fever!' But the article, film, and soundtrack ended up being one of the best, biggest, and exciting things that ever happened to me."