

RICKY VAN SHELTON

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Country singer, songwriter and guitarist, Ricky Van Shelton, has made a career out of sounding great.

"I'm a melody man, first of all," says Shelton, who will perform at the Little Nashville Opry on Saturday, November 19, at 7 p.m. "If I like the melody, then I'll listen to the words. I don't really choose songs with deep messages. I just like music. When I find a song that I like, it's usually because it sounds good and it makes me feel."

Shelton was first introduced to the music industry at age 14 when his older brother Ronnie offered him the opportunity to sing and play guitar in his band. Shelton just wasn't interested because he was into rock 'n roll at the time and Ronnie was into country.

"Then Ronnie made me offer I couldn't refuse," Shelton says. "He said, 'If you'll sing with us, I'll let you drive my 1964 Fairlane 289.'"

The Shelton brothers played fish fries, clubs and living rooms, learning the basics of country music and of putting on a good show. Shelton supported himself with side jobs ranging from pipefitting to pumping gas, and dreamed of a life in music.

Shelton began taking trips to Nashville to develop contacts and sit in with nightclub bands, eventually moving to take his shot at the big time. One of his wife Bettye's co-workers was married to The Tennessean's newspaper writer, Jerry Thompson, who took a shine to both Ricky and his voice, and secured him the audition that won him a record deal.

Shelton's contemporary edge to traditional country music was derived from a lifetime of diverse musical influences.



"I have a wide range of songs in my shows," Shelton says. "But that's because I like all these different kinds of music, and they are a part of me. I love country, I truly do. But I also like bluegrass, gospel, rock n' roll, pop, soul, big band, and Irish music. I'm not just stuck on one of kind of music."

Since his debut in '86, the Grit, Virginia native has topped the charts with twelve Billboard No. 1 country singles including, "Somebody Lied," "Don't We All Have The Right," "From A Jack To A King," "Rockin' Years," and "Keep It Between The Lines."

The '87 Grand Ole Opry member's distinctive brand of country has resulted in twenty major music awards, a legendary fan base, and industry acclaim.

"I remember being so overwhelmed the night I was inducted into the Opry," Shelton says. "I had been listening to the Opry all of my life and never dreamed I would ever be a member. Jack Greene and Roy Acuff introduced me as their newest member and asked me to sing "Somebody Lied". I received a standing ovation and was asked to do an encore. At that point, I was so emotionally overwhelmed, I forgot the words. It was truly one of the most memorable events in my life."

Shelton's creative talents also include being an illustrator and author of a successful series of children's books based on a duck named Quacker, and an accomplished painter.

"I love the texture, thickness and richness of oil painting," Shelton says. "And I enjoy rambling the backroads looking for vibrant landscapes, old barns and homesteads, creeks, and nature to paint. I've always gravitated towards bright colors, because I never was one for pale-colored shirts, vehicles, or basically any pale colors in life."

Once a reluctant flyer, Shelton faced his fears head-on and is now a licensed pilot.

"I never wanted to fly in the past," Shelton says. "I turned down a lot of big money dates over the years because I wouldn't fly to them. Then a friend of mine talked me into going and flying his small Bonanza airplane, and I loved it. It was nothing like the commercial airplanes. So, I started taking flying lessons, and now it's been eleven years."

Shelton is also an active gardener, cattle-raiser, and enjoys collecting and restoring old cars.

"I've always wanted to own my own junkyard," Shelton says. "So when I bought my 150-acre farm near Nashville I started collecting some old cars that needed fixing up. I'll never forget the day my business manager, Chuck Flood, visited the new property. I was driving him around through the fields when he asked me when I was going to haul off the junk cars. I replied, "haul them off !!? I just had them hauled in here !!!" I'll never forget the look on Chuck's face!"

For Shelton, his prime passion remains the music that has been at the core of his existence since he was a teenager.

"Walking on stage is still the best," he says. "In fact, as I continue to gain perspective on my life and career, it's even better than it used to be, because I feel more of the pleasure of performing and less pressure. On stage is where it all comes together for me."