

ROY CLARK

by Tamela Meredith Partridge
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Country entertainer, Roy Clark, has successfully honed a 40-year career out of just being himself.

"The biggest attribute I have is that I'm just ol' Roy," Clark says, who is scheduled to perform at Nashville North USA on Saturday. "I remind women of their brothers or sons, and men aren't intimidated by me. I don't play or sing that far over their heads that they can't say, 'If I wanted to practice, I could do that, and besides, look at him. He's no Greek god, that's for sure.'"



Born in Meherrin, Virginia, Clark moved to Washington, DC with his family as a child. Beginning on banjo and mandolin, Clark was one of those people born with the music already in them.

"I've been around music from the time I was a baby in a crib," Clark says. "My dad and uncles played guitar, banjo and mandolin. I heard music before I really heard much talking. In fact, music really led me. It was always there."

Clark received his first guitar, a Sears Silvertone, as a Christmas present when he was 14 years old.

"I was playing at a square dance with my dad two weeks after I got my first guitar," Clark says. "And that's because I spent the whole Christmas vacation playing that guitar until my fingers actually bled. I found that if I soaked my fingers in ice water, it would make them numb, so that I could continue playing. I would play it morning, noon and night, that's how completely consumed I was."

Clark began playing bars and clubs in DC on weekends until he was playing every night and skipping school - eventually dropping out at age 15.

"I was subjected to different kinds of music before I ever played," Clark says. "Dad said, 'Never turn your ear off to music until your heart hears it - because then you might hear something you like.'"

After winning a national banjo contest in '50, Clark was invited to perform at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, TN.

"I'm the world's biggest fan of great musicians," Clark says. "Whenever I found myself with such country music legends as Little Jimmy Dickens, Hank Snow, Webb Pierce, and other artists like that, I've never felt myself to be on the same plateau. In their presence, I was always a fan."

The guitar wizard went on to tour with some of country music's greatest legends, such as Grandpa Jones, Red Foley, Ernest Tubb, Jimmy Dean and Hank Williams.

"I remember spending two weeks opening three shows a day for Hank Williams in Baltimore, Md.," Clark says. "This is back in the days when these big and magnificent theaters would show a movie, then have a stage show intermission, and show the movie again followed by another stage show. When I was done performing as the opening act, I'd run around to the front of the theater and get a box seat so that I could sit there and watch every show Hank Williams performed there. To this day, I'm amazed at the charisma and magnetism Hank Williams had in regards to his audience. I got to the point where I could imitate him to a 'T,' because of watching him every day. He was just mesmerizing."

Even though Clark toured all over the nation, he always returned to DC to play not only country -- but jazz, pop, blues and early rock 'n' roll.

"I've never played different genres of music thinking that it would enhance my stage presence," Clark says. "I did it because music, in all its forms, is the thing I loved the most and did best."

Opening for Wanda Jackson in '60 at the Golden Nugget in Las Vegas eventually earned the talented musician his own tour. Clark returned to Las Vegas in '62 as the headliner of his own show and to promote debut album, "The Lightning Fingers Of Roy Clark."

"I learned a long time ago to record and perform things on stage that really excite me," Clark says. "That way I'll have a pretty good chance of exciting the audience as well."

Clark's debut country single, "Tips Of My Fingers," topped the country and pop charts in '63.

"We didn't call 'Tips Of My Fingers' a crossover then," Clark says, "but I guess that's what it was. We didn't aim for that, because if you aim for both sides you miss them both. But we just wanted to be believable."

Since then, the '87 Grand Ole Opry member has charted nine Top Ten country hits including, "Yesterday, When I Was Young," "Thank God And Greyhound," "Come Live With Me" and "If I Had It To Do All Over Again."

"I've had so many people come up and say that they just wanted to meet me because I meant so much to a family member of theirs," Clark says. "When your music is shared through a family, they feel like they know you. Especially being on television as long as I've been. I was literally invited into their living rooms and became a part of their family. It's nothing for them to greet me like a favorite neighbor or a relative. It's like, 'Hey, Roy! How ya' doin'?' That familiarity is something you just can't buy."

One of the longest television shows for the wholesome singer and musician was co-hosting the syndicated television series, "Hee Haw" with Buck Owens for 25 years.

"What enjoyed the most about 'Hee Haw' is that we created a family," Clark says, who filmed his first 'Hee Haw' episode in 1969. "We went in twice a year to film -- 13 shows in June and another 13 in October. Then we'd go on our separate ways. But everytime we came in for a taping, it was like a family reunion twice a year. We'd see how much weight the other had gained and learned all the new baby names. It really became a family. We care about each other, protected each other, we were each other's biggest supporters and there was no jealousy. It would have had to have been that way, otherwise it wouldn't have lasted as long as it did."

Clark's upcoming bluegrass album, tentatively titled "Roy Clark Finally Gets Around To His Roots," is still in the planning stages for a 2004 release.

"This album will include the bluegrass songs I remember as a kid, the songs that I love and the songs that no one else has done," Clark says. "I'm amazed that I haven't planned an album like this sooner, because bluegrass and that old-time mountain music is what I was raised on."

For Clark, maintaining a sense of humor has played an important part in his career longevity.

"Humor is a blessing to me," Clark says. "And I'm a firm believer in smiles and seeing the positive, lighter sides of life. I used to believe everything had to be a belly laugh. But I've come to realize that a real sincere smile is might powerful."