INTRODUCTION

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he Encyclopedia of Country Music, compiled by the Country Music Foundation in Nashville and published by Oxford University Press in 1998, has this description of Johnny Bush:

With his early musical associations with both Willie Nelson and Ray Price, singer-songwriter John Bush Shinn III was a minor but significant figure in 1960s and 1970s Texas honky-tonk. Bush's most enduring claim to fame is the song "Whiskey River," which he wrote and had a Top Twenty country hit with in 1972.

With a vocal style hauntingly—perhaps damningly—remi-

niscent of Ray Price, Bush enjoyed minor chart success between 1969 and 1981 on Stop Records and RCA Records, as well as various independent labels. But his career was more than once hampered by a severe neurological condition that affected his voice . . .

The entry, written by veteran country music critic Bob Allen, goes on to mention Bush's early years playing nightclubs around Houston and San Antonio, his apprenticeships in nationally touring bands led by Nelson and Price, his Top 10 solo hits "Undo the Right" and "You Gave Me a Mountain," and Nelson's subsequent adoption of "Whiskey River" as an in-concert theme song. The brief entry concludes by noting Bush's 1998 "comeback" album, *Talk to My Heart*.

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All true, and fair enough as far as it goes. So why is a "minor figure" in country music such as Johnny Bush writing his own book?

The first response to that question is for me to suggest that you read the book. As told in Bush's colorful—at times, *extremely* colorful—first-person narrative, the work provides its own best artistic justification. Bush proves himself to be as masterful at telling a story as he is at singing and songwriting.

Whiskey River (Take My Mind): The True Story of Texas Honky-Tonk is the story of the golden age of Texas country music in the 1950s and '60s—where that music came from and where it has gone. Bob Wills, Moon Mullican, and George Jones are part of this story. So are Charley Pride, George Strait, and Junior Brown. Over the course of the past half century, Johnny Bush has crossed paths with virtually everybody who is anybody in country music, and at some point they all turn up here, usually accompanied by a priceless anecdote or two.

The book is also an unflinchingly honest accounting of one man's life, the "kid from Kashmere Gardens with mud on his shoes," as Bush refers to himself. In fact, I can't recall another country autobiography—and I've read quite a few of them—in which the author has been so brutally honest, both in assessing his own personal shortcomings as well as in stating his professional opinion of what has become of the music to which he has devoted his life. Bush minces few words when discussing his disdain for mainstream contemporary country music, which in his view has gained the world only to lose its soul.

This is no smiley-faced Nashville whitewash job. *Whiskey River (Take My Mind): The True Story of Texas Honky-Tonk* is everything a

book about country music ought to be and almost never is. Bush's tale is equal parts funny and tragic, smart and stupid, happy and sad, sacred and profane.

Johnny Bush's stature within the tradition of Texas honky-tonk music cannot be accurately measured by an objective appraisal of his national chart successes. No, he is not a household name like his friends Ray Price and Willie Nelson. Nor is he Bob Wills, Ernest Tubb, Hank Thompson, Lefty Frizzell, or George Jones, although he's known all of them and shared a bandstand with most of them in a career spanning more than fifty years.

But to those people everywhere who really know and love country music, Bush is *more* than a household name. He is a hero.

Back in the day, before media conglomerates and programming consultants gobbled up the dial in every major market in America, you didn't necessarily hear the identical radio playlist in Fort Worth and San Antonio that you did in Nashville and New York. Bush's records might have gone Top 10 or Top 20 nationally, but they went straight to No. 1 in every city and town in Texas, as well as in many other markets across the South and West.

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Bush's late-sixties and early-seventies recordings brilliantly combined the influence of his two primary musical mentors, Nelson and Price. From the latter, he took the fiddle-'n'-steel sound and the two-step shuffle beat that remain, to this day, at the heart and soul of true Texas honky-tonk. From the former, he gained an appreciation for intelligent song craft. Nelson's lyrics on underrated classics such as "A Moment Isn't Very Long" and "Undo the Right," written a full decade before the Red-Headed Stranger became a pig-tailed national icon, brought a stoic, philosophical sophistication to a genre often derided, then and now, for its self-conscious reliance on corn-fed clichés.

When Price's career veered toward the middle of the road, abandoning the fiddle and the pedal steel for full studio orchestrations, Bush picked up the fallen torch for the Texas shuffle sound. By that time he was well on the way to developing his own unmistakable vocal style, similar to Price's but relying on a vibrato-laden upper register that earned him the honorary title of "the Country Caruso."

Cornell Hurd, now a mainstay of the Austin alternative-country scene, was the fledgling leader of a West Coast hippie-country band in the early seventies when he first encountered Johnny Bush's music:

Ray Price's sixties records were favorites with my band. Once I heard that big Texas shuffle—the fiddle, the steel guitar—I was hooked.

When Johnny's monster recording of "Whiskey River" hit the charts, it was absolutely amazing. It will always be amazing to me. In a world where country music had begun its long descent into "today's hot country," *here* was a record! It was a call to arms, like a SUPERCHARGED Ray Price record, with everything pushed to the firewall: more fiddles, a bigger beat, the epitome of hard-core, whiskey-drinkin', honky-tonk subject matter.

Johnny Bush's "Whiskey River" is still the ultimate whiskey-drinkin' Texas shuffle.

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Bush's recordings and live performances had an even more immediate impact on musicians in his home state of Texas. Weyman McBride, a San Antonio native who later played lead guitar with Bush's Bandolero Band, recalls the first time he saw Bush playing live:

If you were in a band in Texas, you had to play quite a bit of Johnny Bush music because the crowd was going to demand it. The dance crowd loved it because it was fantastic Texas dance music, and the players loved it because the melodies were great, the playing was great, and anything John sang was always his song from that point on.

The musician that came to hear the Bandoleros for the first time was always a little shaken by the difference in the live performance. There was the dancing and the noise of the crowd, and the tempos seemed a little faster. But the biggest difference was the energy of the band. On the live shows, John would let the players take full solos. Some of the greatest musicians in the world play in country bands and you rarely notice it because many times the songs don't give them a chance to play. Johnny Bush gives them that chance. Maybe it's because John is a player himself, but whatever the reason, he always attracts good musicians to his bands and he lets them do what they love.

Between the Red River and the Rio Grande, Johnny Bush *was* a superstar and he *is* a legend, which is why—thirty years since his last

real national hit—he can still fill up a dance hall anywhere in the state, and why subsequent generations of Texas country artists, from George Strait to Pat Green, still genuflect to his legacy.

Whiskey River (Take My Mind): The True Story of Texas Honky-Tonk is Bush's passionate and insightful view of the musical tradition he's helped create, nurture, and sustain. He takes us into the rough-and-tumble honky-tonks where the music was born and bred. We travel with the author on the long bus rides between gigs, where boredom and loneliness were leavened by alcohol and drugs, not to mention the frequent company of friendly female fans. (Just in case anyone had any doubts, the relationship of the male musician to the female "groupie" long predates rock and roll.)

Those whose views of country musicians have been shaped by the sanctimonious image historically presented by the Grand Ole Opry, or by the hippie-versus-redneck sociology of the 1960s, may find themselves taken aback by the sheer debauchery that often characterized the honky-tonk lifestyle. Bush's generation of musicians—as well as many of those who came before them—could party as long and as hard as any of today's young rockers and rappers. Bush tells of one instance in the early sixties when every musician in the band was smoking reefer *except* Willie Nelson.

We get to know Willie pretty well in these pages. Those who've read Nelson's own autobiographies will see a different but no less intriguing portrait here. From their initial meeting as teenagers in San Antonio in the early 1950s to the time they spent together touring clubs in Texas in the 1960s and right up to the present, Nelson has served as a good friend, a supportive big brother, and an artistic mentor to Bush. It was Nelson who helped Bush land the gig playing drums with Ray Price. It was Nelson who financed and produced Bush's debut solo album. And it was Nelson who adopted Bush's "Whiskey River" as an in-concert theme song, subsequently recording it too many times to count, and providing Bush with a source of royalty income that helped him survive the lean years in the 1970s and '80s. If Bush is the often-insecure, all-too-human protagonist of this story, Nelson is the epic cowboy hero. If you have not already done so, read Willie's foreword to this book. Only men who know and love each other like brothers can talk to each other like that and get away with it.

In addition to the previously unexamined cultural history, there is also a significant amount of unpretentiously astute musicology in

this book. For example, Bush's analysis of the importance of the pedal steel guitar in country music is more penetrating than anything I've read by a music critic or a music scholar. This is a musician talking, a man who knows what it's like to be on the bandstand with the best steel guitarists who've ever lived. When Bush compares the crying sound of a pedal steel guitar to "the sound of a heartache, above the noise of happy people in that crowd," he's speaking as an artist, not as an observer.

For me, what is most remarkable about this account is how the development of the music so closely mirrors the events in Bush's personal life. Perhaps part of the reason he could sing so persuasively about drinkin' and cheatin', as well the oppressive sense of guilt that accompanied such behavior, is that he was singing about his own life. Bush's narrative proceeds along two parallel tracks—one personal and one professional—until the trains collide just at the point where he is on the verge of national superstardom.

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In 1972, as RCA Records was set to release "Whiskey River," Bush experienced every singer's nightmare: he lost his voice. At first he was unable to sustain the high notes onstage. The problem worsened until he could hardly speak, although he never completely lost the ability to sing. After years of misdiagnosis, Bush's condition was finally identified as spasmodic dysphonia, a neurological disorder that affects an estimated one out of 35,000 people. With the help of operatic vocal exercises, Bush eventually regained his ability to sing well. He estimates that he now operates at about 75 to 80 percent of where he was in his prime, which is good enough to put any ordinary singer to shame.

Understandably, Bush has pondered what might have been had he not lost his voice at such an inopportune time. The late Tommy Hill, a respected Nashville insider who produced many of Bush's recordings from the sixties through the nineties, had no doubts. "If Johnny Bush had not had a voice problem, he would have been one of the heaviest artists in the business today," Hill told me in 1997. "Put his version of 'You Gave Me a Mountain' against Marty Robbins's or Frankie Laine's. Nobody had more tonal control and perfect pitch than Bush had. That's just my opinion, but I think I know country music."

When I met Johnny Bush in 1989, he was unable to carry on a simple phone conversation. When we began working on this book, in 1999, he still had great difficulty maintaining a regular conversational

flow. Our taping sessions were at times excruciating, and transcribing the tapes was not easy, which is part of the reason the book took so long to finish.

For decades Bush was convinced that God was punishing him for his sins. However, there is a happy ending to this story. He has renewed his faith in God. He is finally married to the right woman. He's cutting good albums again. And thanks to a revolutionary treatment in which minute amounts of Botox are injected directly into the muscle around the vocal cords, Johnny has regained his ability to speak naturally. The downside to this treatment is that he must speak and sing in a lower key. He now sounds more like Johnny Cash than Enrico Caruso. But, hey, it didn't hurt Cash's career, and Bush's recent acoustic album, *Devil's Disciple*, might open a door to a new audience, as did Cash's unplugged recordings in the twilight of his career.

It is the clandestine conceit of this book that the two stories told here are really one. Johnny Bush's autobiography *is* the true story of Texas honky-tonk, which is why this book needed to be written. From his hardscrabble upbringing in Houston and teenage years working in the Gulf Coast oil patch to his recent induction into the Texas Country Music Hall of Fame along with his first hero, the late Lefty Frizzell, Bush has led a life exemplifying the joy and pain of a glorious and timeless art form that deserves more critical respect and academic interest than it has yet to receive.

Some of the things Bush did, some of the things he says, and some of the ways he says them, may offend some readers. But to quote Tom T. Hall's song "Old Jethro":

Now some will condemn me for writing
A song about a man and his wife
But a man can't write unless he relates all the things that he sees
in his life
Now some will condemn me for cursing
But much can be said for this girl
Who gave her heart to old Jethro
And her body to the whole damn world.

And as long as the Whiskey River don't run dry in Texas, you can bet there will be some lost soul to plunk a quarter in the jukebox and punch up an old record by Johnny Bush.

Whiskey river, take my mind
Don't let her memory torture me
Whiskey river, don't run dry
You're all I've got, take care of me.

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