

# **Nashville Songwriter**

*The Inside Stories Behind Country Music's Greatest Hits*

By Jake Brown

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This book is dedicated to Freddy and Catherine Powers  
and to my younger brother, retired Sergeant Joshua T. Brown,  
the first country music fan to really turn me on to the genre.

## Table of Contents

- Chapter 1: Freddy Powers with Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson: Natural High
- Chapter 2: Craig Wiseman: Master of the Three-Minute Movie
- Chapter 3: Tom Shapiro: Never Give Up On a Good Thing
- Chapter 4: Dallas Davidson: Dirt Road Diaries
- Chapter 5: “Whisperin’” Bill Anderson: Whiskey Lullaby
- Chapter 6: Bob DiPiero: American-Made
- Chapter 7: Sonny Curtis: I Fought the Law
- Chapter 8: Tom T. Hall: “The Storyteller”
- Chapter 9: Kelley Lovelace: He Didn’t Have to Be
- Chapter 10: Rivers Rutherford: When I Get Where I’m Going
- Chapter 11: Dean Dillon: I’ve Come to Expect It From You
- Chapter 12: Wayne Carson: Always On My Mind
- Chapter 13: Chris DuBois: Southern Comfort Zone
- Chapter 14: Jeff Silbar: Wind Beneath My Wings
- Chapter 15: David Lee Murphy: Big Green Tractor
- Chapter 16: Brett James: Songwriting Is a Contact Sport
- Chapter 17: Lee Thomas Miller: His Brother’s Keeper
- Chapter 18: Ashley Gorley: Don’t Forget to Remember Me
- Chapter 19: Neil Thrasher: Fly-Over States
- Chapter 20: John Rich of Big & Rich: Five Tips to Close With

## Introduction

“It really is a journeyman’s occupation,” says Rivers Rutherford, hit-writer for country stars including Brad Paisley and Brooks & Dunn, about becoming a professional country songwriter. “The biggest piece of advice I give to new writers when they move to town,” Rutherford continues, “[is] go play your songs for anybody that’ll listen—anybody who will listen. Listen to as many people as you can, and write with as many people as will sit down with you.”

John Rich of Big & Rich adds some sage advice for writers as they begin to be invited to participate in writer’s nights and get a first song put on hold or cut: “to be successful in songwriting, you have to write because you love it, not because you’re driven to get rich doing it.” Longtime George Strait hit-writer Dean Dillon echoes this with his memory that, “when I hitchhiked down here when I was eighteen years old, it wasn’t because I thought I’d get rich off of it, it was because I loved it.”

In a business whose profit margins continue to shrink, courtesy of online music piracy, Nashville has remained one of the best-kept secrets in the record business: an affordable town for an aspiring songwriter or country performing artist to pull into, without much more than the clothes on his back and guitar strapped around her shoulder, and try to make it as a singer or songwriter—without starving in the process. The great Sonny Curtis, writer of “I Fought the Law (and the Law Won),” highlighted songwriting as the vehicle that allowed him “to survive, doing what I love to do [while] making a living and raising my family.”

While most aspiring singer-songwriters never become famous performers like Curtis, their songs can still hit it big. A little-known norm of Music Row is that the majority of country stars historically *do not* write their own material, but rather record hits from songs created by an elite club of Nashville songwriters.

Even now, with a new generation of country artists who are more hands-on in cowriting their hits (like superstars Carrie Underwood, Kenny Chesney, Brad Paisley, and Luke Bryan), this town is filled with successful writers whose careers have lasted long after those of the singers who made their songs famous.

That isn't to say that the road to becoming a hit songwriter is an easy one. Along the way, almost every success story in these pages is based on working even harder to top the last chart-topper. As one of Music Row's most prolific hitmakers, Craig Wiseman – co-writer of the 2004 Grammy for Best Country Song of The Year for the Tim McGraw hit '*Live Like You Were Dying*' – attested, "When you [write] a lot, you do get better at it—you learn about yourself, you push yourself, you grow, and if you do it a lot, too . . . a lot of it is to just do it."

*Nashville Songwriter* features first-time-ever-in-a-book interviews with many of today's biggest hit writers, who have penned, collectively, the majority of the No. 1 country hits over the past decade. Country music fans are treated to a rare collection of inspiring stories behind the writing of generations of beloved and timeless country classics, as well as huge modern-day smash hits; to name just a few examples: Willie Nelson's "Always on My Mind"; Tim McGraw's "Live Like You Were Dying," "Southern Voice," and "Real Good Man"; George Jones's "Tennessee Whiskey"; Carrie

Underwood's "Jesus Take the Wheel" and "Cowboy Cassanova"; Brooks & Dunn's "Ain't Nothin' Bout You"; Lady Antebellum's "We Owned the Night" and "Just a Kiss"; Brad Paisley's "Mud on the Tires," "We Danced," and "I'm Still a Guy"; Luke Bryan's "Crash My Party" and "That's My Kind of Night"; the Oak Ridge Boys' "American Made"; George Strait's "Fool Hearted Memory," "Ocean Front Property," and "The Best Day"; Rascal Flatts's "Fast Cars and Freedom," "Why Wait," and "Take Me There"; Kenny Chesney's "Living in Fast Forward" and "When the Sun Goes Down"; Ricochet's "Daddy's Money"; Montgomery Gentry's "If You Ever Stop Lovin' Me"; the Crickets' "I Fought the Law"; Tom T. Hall's "Harper Valley PTA" and "A Week in the County Jail"; Trace Adkins' "You're Gonna Miss This"; David Lee Murphy's "Dust on the Bottle"; and Jason Aldean's "Big Green Tractor" and "Fly Over States" among countless others.

For aspiring writers, the enlightening stories told by these hit songwriters include many jewels of wisdom about the process and craft itself. Pearls like the one Dallas Davidson, cowriter of "Crash My Party" and "Rain is a Good Thing," offers up regarding his recipe to songwriting success: "a good title and a good melody, and some honesty—there's your formula for a hit right there." Or a gem from Kelley Lovelace—cowriter of such monster Brad Paisley hits as "He Didn't Have to Be," "Start a Band," and "Remind Me"—who shares his formula for creating memorable chart-toppers, hammering home the importance of staying as hungry for the next No. 1 one as you were for the first, saying, "Being in the game, that's what's really fun, if you can have something in the game, something in the hunt. Still, seeing your song on somebody's record that you can purchase is a lot of fun. I like seeing those titles on the records. All the same things that

you think you would be excited about when you get your first cut are still the same things I get excited about now. That high never really changes—you just want more of it.”

*“When a guy like me gets to hang out with a guy like Freddy, it’s always rarified air. . . . Not many people can say they know a guy like Freddy, and really know him, and really have written with him. He is a jewel—there’s nothing like him anywhere out there.”*

—John Rich, 2013

## Chapter 1

**Freddy Powers and Merle Haggard: Natural High**

*Featuring exclusive commentary from Willie Nelson  
and John Rich of Big & Rich*

“Ask country superstars Willie Nelson, George Jones, or Merle Haggard who Freddie [*sic*] Powers is and they'll probably tell you that he's one of country music's best-kept secrets,”<sup>1</sup> the *Los Angeles Times* reported in 1985. The “Ol’ Blue Eyes” of country music started out in the business in the early 1950s, with the *Times* adding that Powers was “originally part of the same West Texas scene that in the fifties spawned Nelson and other country ‘outlaws.’”<sup>2</sup>

Powers got his start under the mentorship of legendary Texas musical fixture Paul Burkirk, who invited Freddy to appear on television with him in the late fifties, leading to the beginnings of singer-songwriter’s success as a country-western star. Appearances on ABC-TV’s *Hootenanny* and a guest slot on the original *Today* show soon followed. Powers traveled the touring circuits throughout the sixties on both music hall and casino stages at legendary palaces like the Stardust, entertaining fans with his unique blend of vaudeville comedy and country songs, performed with his signature Dixieland jazz twist. Willie Nelson, who played the same live circuit while making his own rise to stardom, remembered feeling that “his [Powers’] strongest suit, I always thought, was his rhythm guitar playing. He was a great rhythm guitar player.” Country Music Television noted in its official bio of Powers’ career highlights that he,

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold, Thomas K. “Tour With Star May End a Country Music Secret.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

along with Nelson and Buskirk, “demonstrated a dedication to broadening the perimeters of country-and-western, particularly in creating a fusion of country honky-tonk and swing jazz.”<sup>3</sup>

Powers built a name for himself on the country touring circuit with his band, Freddy Powers and the Powerhouse Four (consisting of a tuba and three banjos), which played a repertoire of a Dixieland and jazz. Performing eventually made Powers enough money to open his own nightclub in Arlington, Texas. His early spotlight moments also included regular appearances on NBC’s *Today* show and the *Tonight Show*.

By the early 1970s, Powers had established himself as one of Las Vegas and Reno’s top casino headliners. Las Vegas at that time, the *Austin Chronicle* reported in 2008, was “an entertainer’s paradise. Mob money flowed freely from the casinos, and artists were toasted like royalty. The glamour and attention was a world away from the rough barrooms of Texas, and Powers found himself right in the midst of it. He was hired to lead the house band at the Stardust, the flagship enterprise of Allan Glick’s Chicago Mafia–backed Argent Corp. In the plush red booths at the back of the lounge, Powers spent his evenings drinking with notorious gangsters like Lefty Rosenthal and Tony Spilotro, who were running operations at the Stardust behind titled fronts like ‘entertainment director.’ . . . Powers reveled in the perks but remained strictly focused on his music.”<sup>4</sup>

Back home in the West I had become one of Las Vegas’s hottest live acts by then—even being awarded Nevada’s best lounge act. When the early eighties came along, I had already spent twenty years of my life on the music circuit, playing throughout the United States, mostly in Nevada lounges. At the time I had a Dixie band where I

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<sup>3</sup> Chadbourne, Eugene. “Freddy Powers: Bio,” on Country Music Television website, accessed March 2014, <http://www.cmt.com/artists/freddy-powers/>.

<sup>4</sup> Freeman, Doug. “The Good Times Ain’t Over,” *The Austin Chronicle*, Aug. 22, 2008, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2008-08-22/663226>.

also performed comedy. It was a great bunch of road musicians. After years on the road we finally landed a dream sit-down gig in Reno at the Eldorado Hotel/Casino.

One day while Willie Nelson was in Reno, I remember we'd gotten together with another friend of mine, Nate Green, for a golf game. I'd first met Willie back in 1954 when Paul Buskirk, my hero and mentor, had introduced us. Paul was a major influence over both my and Willie's careers, and we all had some great times together traveling around the country. I'm sure Willie misses Paul as much as I do, God rest his soul.

WILLIE NELSON: The first time I remember seeing Freddy, he was playing in a banjo band in Arlington, Texas, and it was like a noontime show at some club, that was many years ago. Then we ran into each other up in Houston when he was down there with Paul Buskirk, and he and Paul and I played a lot of music together and had a lot of fun.

FREDDY POWERS: Years later, Willie and I got to talking about the old musicians we knew and soon got around to Django Reinhardt. The next thing I knew we were making plans to get some of these old guys together and make an album. Will, at the time, was as hot as the Texas rodeo, and Willie had asked me to help produce, sing, and play on that album, which became *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

Seeing something unique in Powers' instincts for picking, Willie recruited Powers to not only play on his 1981 multiplatinum *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* LP, but to act as lead producer on the project as well.

WILLIE NELSON: *Over the Rainbow*, which Freddy produced, is one of my favorite albums. We've been in the studio many times together and I enjoyed all of them. He's a lot of fun to play with, and when Freddy was at his best, there was nobody better at what he did.

I think *Rainbow* is one of the best albums I ever did because Freddy and Buskirk and Dean Reynolds were playing on it. Freddy's strongest suit, I always thought, was his rhythm guitar playing. He was a great rhythm guitar player. I liked Django Reinhardt, and Django's brother was a great rhythm guitar player, and Freddy and Paul Buskirk both were the two best rhythm guitar players—other than Django's brother—that I've ever known.

Powers' profile would rise to even greater heights after his talent as a song crafter began to take flight when another country music superstar, Merle Haggard, who he'd met through Nelson, saw a different gift altogether in Powers as a songwriter. Powers reflects on a friendship that has lasted for more than forty years:

Of all the country singers I had ever met, Merle made the greatest impact on me when I met him. I was hanging out one day with Willie at Bill Harrah's house where Willie'd been staying while playing at the Lake Tahoe Harrah's. We were sitting around smoking a joint one day when none other than Merle Haggard walked in! I introduced myself, and Merle replied, "Freddy Powers—I love the work you did on Willie's new album *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*." He said that it was his favorite album, and I must say I was flattered so much so that I didn't really know what to say. Little did I know that this meeting with Merle would be the start of a new career, and that Merle would bring out things in me that I never knew I had (like the ability to write hit songs). From that day on until now, Merle and I were never too far away from each other.

I had my bass player and best friend Dean Reynolds with me—we called him Deanie Bird. The two of us were the rhythm section with Merle and Willie taking turns on lead guitar. Merle really liked our style of swing and Dixieland jazz. Willie had to leave to go and play his show, but the three of us—Deanie Bird, Merle, and I—continued to play almost all night long, which turned into days and days of picking. Merle just couldn't get enough. I didn't realize it at the time but Merle was

learning jazz from us. Not far-out jazz but country jazz. The three of us became close and enjoyed playing so much together that if Merle wasn't in Reno, we were on our way to Redding, California, to Merle's home to play. Here I am at the top of the Nevada lounge circuit and about to chase around the world with Merle Haggard.

MERLE HAGGARD: Fred had been working in Reno across the street from Harrah's at the El Dorado, and he'd been doing mainly Dixieland up until that time, and was interested in trying to get deeper into country music, and I was wanting to play guitar. So he was doing the singing and playing rhythm guitar, and had a guy named Gary Church who was playing the clarinet and trombone, and a good friend named Dean Reynolds who we called Deanie Bird. So that became a little four-piece band that we called the Butter and Eggs Band. We got together there—I think the first time we actually played together, we played for eighteen hours up there at Harrah's in Reno. We really enjoyed playing together because he knew a thousand songs and I wanted to learn them all, and he wanted to write some country songs, so we did.

FREDDY POWERS: One night we were at Harrah's hotel and casino in Tahoe in Merle's room before a gig of his, and I grabbed his guitar and sang "I Always Get Lucky With You" for him. When I finished the song, he just stared at me for a moment saying nothing as if he didn't know how to tell me it was a shitty song! But instead, he jumped up out of his chair and said something about how the title of the song along was a hit. When Merle said that, it was like a lightning bolt of confidence that hit me, and that moment, unbeknownst to me, was the launching point of my songwriting career.

We took the song on the bus after the show and with some collaboration we rewrote the song and recorded it for Merle's *Big City* album. One night not long after that, the phone rang and it was Merle's office manager Tex Whitson. He said Merle had rewritten my song ("Lucky"), and played it over the phone to me on a little tape recorder. I couldn't hear it too good over the phone, but it sounded awful good from

what I could hear, and the album went on to become a No. 1. George Jones heard the song and liked it so he also recorded it and he had a No. 1 hit with it!

MERLE HAGGARD: There's a lot to that. We were sitting in somebody's bus, I don't remember whether it was mine or his, and Fred and I wrote the song. Well, there were two other guys there, and being stupid, we gave them part of the song. I said, "Well, I've got publishing, so I'll just go ahead and give you two the writers' end, and I'll take the publishing." Well, I got beat out of the publishing in bankruptcy, and when I look down at that song after it was recorded by George Jones, and my name ain't on it nowhere and I wrote most of the song—. That's the way life goes sometimes.

FREDDY POWERS: We had been out on tour and pulled back in town to see a billboard saying, Congratulations Tex Watson! I Always Get Lucky With You. Merle and I walked in to find it was a party for Tex in his honor for writing this No. 1. Needless to say he never mentioned my or Merle's name. One day he was bragging on the song and I handed him my guitar and told him if he wrote the song than play me an A augmented. Well, with that, the conversation was over and I rest my case. Sometimes you have to be careful what you do, because some people start believing their own lies.

As the roaring eighties revved up, Powers and Haggard's professional partnership as songwriters turned personal—so much so that Haggard invited Powers to move into a houseboat next door to him on Lake Shasta so they could write regularly. Songwriting success followed: the pair cowrote "I Always Get Lucky With You," a No. 1 for George Jones, and half the songs on the Haggard's 1985 *It's All in the Game* LP. Powers also became a member of Haggard's band, the Strangers, playing rhythm guitar while the band was on the road.

The two had an obvious chemistry; the *Austin Chronicle* noted, “Powers’ jazz guitar and poignant songwriting softened the hard edges of Haggard’s honky-tonk, resulting in indelible ballads.”<sup>5</sup> Haggard would tap into that chemistry to write additional No. 1 country classics with Powers: “A Friend in California,” “Let’s Chase Each Other Around the Room Tonight,” “All I Wanna Do is Sing My Song,” “Natural High,” “A Place to Fall Apart,” the aforementioned “I Always Get Lucky with You,” by Haggard and George Jones; “Shotgun and the Pistol” (performed by Willie Nelson), “Little Hotel Room” (performed by Ray Charles), and many others.

Reflecting back on the “houseboat days,” when Haggard first invited him to move up to Lake Shasta and become songwriting partners and to play rhythm guitar for Haggard’s band the Strangers when the band was on the road, Powers remembers noticing that, in addition to Haggard’s interest in songwriting with him, musically speaking,

Merle was enjoying learning Dixieland jazz and the style that Deanie Bird and I were playing. And I was learning a hell of a lot about writing country songs, so I made the decision to split up my band and relocated to the lake [Lake Shasta] with Merle. I took two members of my band with me, of course: Deanie Bird, my bass player, and Gary Church, who played trumpet and trombone. Merle hired Gary and Deanie Bird and I into his band the Strangers, and for the next two years, we also toured with Merle as his opening act.

After living nearly ten years next door to Merle, today when I hear one of his songs, I’ll remember the story behind that and know what part of his life he’s singing about. By 1983, Merle and I were living on the boats full-time, writing and partying. We called it the Spree of ’83. Everything was moving so fast and even in

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<sup>5</sup> Freeman, Doug. “The Good Times Ain’t Over,” *The Austin Chronicle*, Aug. 22, 2008, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2008-08-22/663226>.

this hectic atmosphere, we were still turning out hit songs. Here we were, two single, middle-aged men, living in a near-paradise lifestyle. Merle was hot as a pistol and his career was at its peak. It was one big party for the next seven years or so. I traveled with that circus to every state in the country. From the beginning, Merle and I were almost inseparable. Where one went, we both went.

Many of the songs we wrote during that time were about lost loves or love experiences. Merle wrote a lot of songs about his love and feelings for his ex-wife Leona. As well, I was writing songs about my past life, which gave us both a lot to write about. We wrote a few No. 1s and some that should have been No. 1s that just got overlooked in albums. Songs we wrote during that time were like an audio-biography of our lives. And of course, for me, writing songs with such a great writer was a terrific ego boost. With my confidence at this level, I was putting my heart into every song.

MERLE HAGGARD: We kind of helped each other sometimes when we'd have songs pretty well finished, then we'd give them to each other, and use each other's experience to see if we were on the right track. We did that a lot. Me and Willie were both in a position to influence him and to guide him a little bit. He didn't need much—he just wanted somebody to assure him he was on the right track I think. After "I Always Get Lucky With You," we played nonstop for about five years. Sometimes we'd eat, sometimes we'd have a drink, but mostly, we played all the time. Living out on the lake there, we had the boats hooked up to the shoreline where we had phones down there so we could call up and get whatever supplies we needed while we worked. We wrote songs all the time. We didn't have no reason beforehand, we just wrote songs and a lot of the sons of bitches we never heard again. Everything we wrote didn't go to No. 1; a lot of them we threw in the goddamn lake, because [not all of it was] good.

Among the keepers that wound up becoming some of Haggard's biggest hits of the 1980s, one standout was Powers' second No. 1 hit as a writer (following George Jones' success with "I

Always Get Lucky With You”), “Natural High.” The Powers original was a soaring love ballad that Powers remembered he hadn’t written for any love interest specifically:

I got that idea from a great singer named Debbie DeFazio who was always the life of the party even though she *never* took drugs or drank.

MERLE HAGGARD: “Natural High” was a good song. It was peaceful, and it kind of captured the mood that we had going out there at the lake. We thought we was on a natural high, although it might have been marijuana—I don’t know [*laughs*].

Recounting the inspiration behind two more of his and Haggard’s greatest cowritten hits, the No. 1 “Let’s Chase Each Other Around the Room Tonight” and “A Place to Fall Apart,” Powers described how the latter, in particular, was a wonderful example of how cowriters push one another at times to chase a song idea they might never have pursued on their own. Remembering the roots of “Fall Apart” as growing out of Merle’s heartbreak over his breakup with wife Leona Williams, Powers recalled taking an unusual approach to push Haggard to start the song one night:

We got to Nashville on time, and we were sitting around playing guitars. Merle had just finished writing a lot of songs about Leona Williams. He was working on one when I asked him, “When are you going to quit writing about Leona? Why don’t you write what you want to say and get it over with?” I come up with the idea that he write her a letter, saying once and for all everything he wanted to say to her and how he felt about the whole affair. He agreed and that’s how “A Place to Fall Apart” came about. The letter began: “Dear Leona, I’ll probably never see you eye to eye again, and this letter is meant to be my last goodbye. I thought everything was over until your phone call. That call turned my life around.”

MERLE HAGGARD: We wrote “A Place to Fall Apart” right here at the Opryland Hotel. He got the song title from Willie, brought it up to me, and one day asked me if I’d ever written anything about my divorce, and I said, “No, I don’t want to write anything about my divorce, I want to forget it.” I said, “I’d like to write a letter,” and Freddy said, “Well, why don’t you sit down and write the letter?” and I sat down, wrote the letter, and the letter became the song. That’s how it came out.

FREDDY POWERS: That song went on to become another No. 1 for us. It was on the *All in the Game* album. We had three No. 1 hits on that album. We wrote “Let’s Chase Each Other Round the Room” while we were on tour coming out of Canada and heading for Nashville to the BMI Country Awards. It was probably around three in the morning and we had our guitars out. My girlfriend at the time, Sherrill Rodgers, was singing in the band. She had said, “When I get to Nashville, I’m going to chase you around the room.” Merle and I picked up on that and it didn’t take us long and we had a song. That one also went on to become a No. 1 song with over one million airplays.

Another personal highlight for Powers came in the late 1980s when the legendary Ray Charles decided to record one of Powers’ songs, “Little Hotel Room.” Counting this among his proudest achievements, Powers recalled the surreal experience:

We were in Nashville and Ray was doing an album with some of his friends in the music business, and Merle came in and asked me if we had anything Ray could do. I jumped and said, “Yes, I do!” I had written this song, and the first time Deanie Bird heard it he said, “That sounds like a Ray Charles song.” So I walked into the studio and sat down on one end of the piano bench and Ray Charles on the other, and taught him the song!

Looking back years later, Powers marveled at the decade he and Haggard wrote against the paradisiacal backdrop of Lake Shasta: “together, we collaborated on some thirty songs he had

recorded on albums as well as some that I wrote by myself. We had five No. 1 hits, CMA Song of the Year and received the CMA Triple Play Award for writing three No. 1 songs in a twelve-month period. And have since become what is called members of the [BMI] Million-Air play club for over one million plays on the radio with ‘Let’s Chase Each Other Around the Room Tonight.’”

Powers would continue entertaining, influencing, and inspiring fans throughout the 1990s, releasing solo albums, including the celebrated *Country Jazz Singer Collectors Edition*, which he released in 2000, and having success on television with *Rogers & Hammerhead*, a talk show (nominated for a CableACE Award) that Powers hosted with Bill McDavid on the Austin Music Network in the 1990s. Powers also continued to perform as a member of Merle Haggard’s the Strangers, a position that allowed him high-profile appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and to cohost (with legendary University of Texas football coach Darrell Royal) his legendary annual Freddy Powers’ Pickin’ Party at the famed South by Southwest music conference. Freddy’s Pickin’ Parties attract many of Texas’s biggest country music stars and in recent years have been the stage for discovering up-and-coming Texas country music artists like Kevin Ahart, whom the *Austin Chronicle* said, in 2011, “might be the best Austin singer you’ve never heard . . . discovered at one of Freddy Powers’ parties.”<sup>6</sup>

Ranked right up alongside Powers’ skill as a songwriter is his prowess as a guitar player. He has been recognized as one of the finest rhythm guitar players in the business, as Willie Nelson attested, saying, “Freddy’s one of the best guitar players, whether he’s playing jazz or blues or country—all of it,” Powers displayed his skill on his first and most famous solo LP, the

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<sup>6</sup> Powell, Austin. “Off the Record,” *The Austin Chronicle*, June 17, 2011, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2011-06-17/off-the-record>.

*The Country Jazz Singer*, showcasing his famed Freddy Powers chords, up and down the fret board—a singular playing style that has been celebrated by peers throughout the generations.

MERLE HAGGARD: Freddy was able to play whatever he needed to as a member of the Strangers. He played rhythm guitar real well, he had the ability to play a banjo lick with his right hand from his years playing banjo, and it worked real good. He kind of needed a banjo-type rhythm because it was a swing band, and banjo was always kind of like the drums because it played to the snare drum. Freddy didn't play banjo anymore when he joined my band, but he played with a banjo rhythm on the guitar.

JOHN RICH (OF BIG & RICH): Watching Freddy play the guitar was really something else—the guy rips jazz licks left and right that were Willie Nelson on kill! It was actually probably better than Willie, it was the real, real high-end educated jazz licks in these country songs. I asked Freddy the first time I ever saw him play, “When did you start putting jazz licks into country stuff?” And he said, “Always. I've always done it.” So next I asked him, “Is that where Merle got a lot of his sound and his style?” And Freddy wouldn't take credit for that, but he said, “Well, we have sat around swapping licks for many, many years,” and I was so intrigued by Freddy at that minute that I decided this [was] a honky-tonk hero and I needed to dig down in him as far as I could and really understand this guy. I just had so much reverence for what he had accomplished in country music.

Rich's respect for Powers is widely shared by generations of stars who have helped make Freddy's songs standards within country music—and continue to do so. Millennium-era renditions of Powers' hits read like a who's who of the biggest stars in the business: “I Always Get Lucky With You” by Kenny Chesney, “Silver Eagle” by Tanya Tucker, “Natural High” by Gretchen Wilson, “All I Wanna Do is Sing My Song” by Mary Sarah, and “One Less Honky Tonk in Texas” by Pauline Reese. Recognized in 2013 by the Nashville Songwriters Association

International (NSAI) for Outstanding Achievement as a Songwriter and Musician, Freddy was also one of the two the first inductees (with Sonny Throckmorton) into the Texas Heritage Songwriters' Hall of Fame.

Putting the reach of Freddy's influence today in perspective, John Rich of Big & Rich said, "what you realize is that what Freddy is, he's a great-granddaddy of country music. He's an innovator, and now generation after generation of country singers—including myself—has been impacted by his songwriting and playing, whether they realize it or not." For his own part, the eighty-two-year-old songwriter is grateful that his songs have stayed alive in the country music consciousness for so many decades now:

I can't imagine my life without music. Most of all, the people I love best are musicians or people who solely love music and have respect. I am very proud of my songwriting career and thankful to all my friends and to those that I have never gotten to meet who have recorded my songs throughout the years. If I were to complain about anything, it's that after I had my first hit people began to refer to me as a songwriter and somehow forgot I was a singer, too. I've spent most of my life as a singer and musician and love the stage and enjoy the satisfaction of knowing people like my singing and my style of guitar playing. Music is my life, and with the grace of God I think it will always be.

**Postscript:** In the late 1990s, Freddy Powers was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, which eventually robbed him of the ability to sing and to play his beloved guitar. This tragedy is a particularly bitter one because, as John Rich says, "there's no crueler way to take a guy like Freddy out than with what he's got: for his hands to go away and his dexterity, and he can't really talk. And to be as great a singer and picker as he is, and a great people person—for that to be what takes you out is just a crazy irony to me. It is what it is, but I think the thing about him

is, he didn't say a word. They picked him up and set him on my bus the other night, and those old crazy, blue eyes open up and look at ya, and he didn't have to say anything—you just start bustin' out laughing because you know what he's thinking. And if you really know Freddy, you can read him just by looking in his eyes and watching his expression, he's a real communicator even now.”

Powers founded the Freddy Powers Parkinson's Foundation with his wife Catherine in 2006. The organization's live benefit concerts with friends like Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, and Sonny Throckmorton and others have, to date, raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. The *Austin Chronicle* noted that, “perhaps the organization's greatest achievement has been through its support of treatment Parkinson's research.”<sup>7</sup> In 2011 Freddy wrote one of his most moving songs, reflecting on the impact Parkinson's has had on his life and reminding fans why he remains as powerful a songwriter as ever:

### **Guitar on the Wall**

(Freddy Powers/Gary Nicholson)

My old friend quit the cigarettes  
and cut way back on the booze

But there's some habits of a lifetime

ain't that easy to lose

He'd been pickin' guitar

since he was just a kid

Then one day the doctor told him

he'd never play again

And the saddest good-bye of all

was when he had to hang his guitar on the wall

If that six strings could talk

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<sup>7</sup> Freeman, Doug. “The Freddy Powers Parkinson Organization,” *The Austin Chronicle*, Aug. 22, 2008, <http://www.austinchronicle.com/music/2008-08-22/663228/>.

Lord, the stories we would hear  
It was there to bring the songs to life  
through the laughter and the tears  
Now he knows his old guitar  
has made its final curtain call  
And the saddest good-bye of all  
was when he had to hang his guitar on the wall  
We've all lost things we love in this life  
We've all said our share of sad good-byes  
But the saddest good-bye of all  
was when he had to hang his guitar on the wall  
Yeah, the saddest good-bye of all  
was when Freddy hung his guitar on the wall