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"Kenny Roberts and the Country Pop Style"

Payne Roberts

Multicultural America

Dr. Sommers

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Kenny Roberts is a musician from Norman Park, Georgia. He plays the guitar and sings. He was involved in gospel music as a child and later became a country pop musician in Nashville, Tennessee. I interviewed Mr. Roberts on November 10, 1999 in Norman Park, Georgia at 4:30 pm.

The country pop style is "hard to define"(Keagan). Country music has changed throughout time into different versions of the same base style. "It has been a creation and organic reflection of southern working-class culture, changing as that society has changed, but it has been simultaneously a dynamic element of American Pop culture"(Keagan). Eck Robertson made the first documented recording as a fiddle player. From there country music became a well known creation. Country music as a whole had it's origins in the folk culture of the South, which was a very diverse culture that blended resources of Africa and Europe. "It was British at the core, but eclectic in it's borrowings"(Keagan). The Nashville Sound is a blend of pop and country that developed in the 1950's. "This sound, or Country pop, was considered to be a compromise that would appeal to both old-time country fans and the newly sought pop audience"(Website).

When asked to tell a little about himself, Mr. Roberts started with, "I've done a little bit of all kind of things, and music has been my highlight". Kenny started singing in a gospel quartet at age eleven in 1951. He sang first tenor in the quartet along with his two brothers and a cousin. They performed at numerous gospel concerts around south Georgia including all night gospel sings with "big name quartets". During the time Kenny was in the quartet, his uncle showed him the basic chords on the guitar. From there he taught himself how to play the guitar. In his teens, his favorite musician was Elvis Presley. Elvis inspired Kenny to get into the music scene and to start playing and singing in the style of country pop. He formed a band in 1956 and started plying cover songs at parties. He and his band also played at social gatherings, fraternity parties in Athens, Georgia, and at homecoming parties in Moultrie, Georgia.

Kenny got "discovered" by the parents of Boudleuax Bryant, who lived in Moultrie. Boudleuax Bryant was a song writer in Nashville who wrote many number one songs including sixteen consecutive number one hits for the Everly Brothers. Boudleuax took Kenny up to Nashville and got him a record deal with Decca Records. He also wrote most of Kenny's songs. He recorded 12 professional recordings including "You've Got Everything" which sold 236,000 copies.

Before Kenny started recording, he opened the ^{show} for a lot of popular bands. One of the bands was Jerry Lee Lewis. He played in Moultrie, Georgia along with Valdosta, Adel, and Douglas. Kenny said that when they were performing, Jerry Lee started "shady actions" on the stage in front of a crowd filled with mothers and grandmothers and got booed off the stage. During intermission, Kenny explained to Jerry Lee that the crowd didn't fit with his actions, so after intermission Jerry Lee changed his ways. He went out and sang "Your Cheating Heart" and Kenny said, "that time they tore the house down".

The first recording that Kenny made with Decca Records was a culture shock for him. He was just "a little old boy from south Georgia that didn't know anybody or anything", and he was named the leader of the session. He walked in and he was among Grady Martin (guitar), Floyd Cramer (piano), Buddy Harmin (drummer), Lightnin' Chance (bass), and the Jordanairs and Anita Kurrs (backup singers). Kenny said that "it was like somebody shot a gun at a rabbit...and I was scared". Grady Martin pulled him to the side and took him out for a cup of coffee to calm his nerves. Kenny remembered that his band from home would practice for hours on end getting ready for a concert, but when he went in with the professional musicians, it was a different story. Floyd Cramer simply asked Kenny to sing a few bars from the song and then started "calling out numbers of chords and the changes and the augmenteds and the whatever, and [he] didn't know nothing about that". They rehearsed a couple of times and they were ready to record. Kenny said that he "was

amazed....and he could not believe that any human being could be that talented".

After that, Kenny played a show in Memphis, Tennessee at the Little Black Book Club in a performance contest. He played against Mickey Gilley among others. The contest was judged on applause and crowd reaction and the winner won fifty dollars. Kenny (stage named Lance) went home with the money. He also played a show with Charlie Rich, who in Kenny's words was a "gentleman...a very fine fellow". They played together at the Lamp Lighter Club in Memphis for a month. Kenny said that Charlie Rich liked to drink and he may have liked it a little too much. He said that Charlie would get so drunk that he couldn't even walk, but he could sit down and "play the prettiest piano you've ever heard". Playing with Charlie Rich was not only a successful experience for Kenny, but he also learned a lot about working the crowd and had fun doing it.

Kenny ended up "rubbing elbows with the stars" in Nashville. He would play ping pong in the Columbia studios with Hank Williams Jr., Grady Martin, and Floyd Cramer. He also got an opportunity to meet the person that inspired his music career, Elvis Presley. Kenny got to visit Elvis at Graceland for a day and if that isn't enough, he also got to ride in his van and go get something to eat. Kenny remembers this experience like it happened yesterday. He got into Elvis' black van - Elvis had on a black hat and black leather jacket- and they went to the alley behind a restaurant where a waiter was ready with their food. They had a hamburger and a pepsi cola. They then went back to Graceland and "hung out" all day. This was definitely a highlight for Kenny.

Shortly after Kenny's last album came out, he decided to get out of the business. He said, "It just got to be a rat race". One of Kenny's good friends, Scotty Moore (Elvis's guitar player), said, "When you've done it all, what else is there to do?". After Kenny got out of the performing end of the music business, he and a friend started producing records for people

in Nashville. He did that for a while and then decided to get married and move back home to Norman Park, Georgia. He married and became a farmer. Kenny said of his experiences, "Now it's no big thing for me, but if I had never done it, it would have been. Kenny still sings around the community. He and his wife and daughter sing at parties, weddings, funerals, and talent shows, along with the occasional Karaoke binge. He now ^{Sells} sales cars at Robert Hudson Motors in Moultrie, Georgia.

Kenny Roberts fits into the music of his environment perfectly. He learned his style of music where he lives and continues to share his talents with the community. Country music is "American" in one aspect even though the instruments came from other countries. The guitar came from Europe and Africa, the drums from Africa, and the words are English, but country music is known for telling a story. The American part of the music is that it does tell a story of American lives. The style is also unique to America. The style is a creolization of many other styles from different places, along with a style created distinctly American. Country music was born in America and continues to grow here. Although it has changed drastically through the years, the roots of the music are still embedded in the music and in Kenny Roberts.

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