

Billy's Memoirs

Crossed The Great Divide with Levon Helm.

Levon Helm played with *The Band*. He played the drums, the mandolin, the fiddle and any instrument that was in his hands. He was an expressive, soulful singer for one of the greatest American bands there has ever been.

My band, *The Paradise Rockers*, opened for *The Band* at a Washington DC music venue called The Bayou in 1988 or '89. The Rockers would have been my brother, Doug Kemp on drums, Dave Chappell on guitar and, possibly Johnny Castle on bass (I can't quite remember).

I was introduced to *The Band* by a high school friend, Cotton Karrer, in 1970. I saw *The Band* perform with Bob Dylan in 1975. More than any other band, *The Band*, had a profound influence on my musical path. I listened to their records almost daily during the early '70s. I was briefly in a band with Cotton and a piano player named Sara Huff in high school. We called ourselves *Po' Buckra*. We did a few of the *Band's* songs. One that I really liked was called "Jawbone."

The Band at the time when I opened for them featured Levon Helm on drums, Rick Danko on bass, Garth Hudson on keyboards and Jim Weider on guitar. Two of the original members, Robbie Robertson and Richard Manuel, were no longer touring. Robbie Robertson was a solo artist, and Richard Manuel had died.

I remember my brother, Doug, and Levon getting on well, enjoying a couple of long neck Budweiser beers. I remember the gorgeous vocal harmonies that Levon and Rick performed. I remember Garth sitting at his organ, eyes closed, rocking slowly as he was in the music.

"Across the Great Divide" is a song from *The Band's* 1969 record, *The Band*. Written by Robbie Robertson, Richard Manuel sings the lead vocal of this American classic. The song is an optimistic story about meeting in that place where two sides come together, East & West, North & South, Past & Present.

Thank you to Levon Helm for your spirit, soul and artistry. Thank you to Robbie Robertson for your keen eye, ear, words and music. Thank you to Richard Manuel for your deep delivery and hopeful tinge. Thank you to Rick Danko for your smile, thumb thumping and heartfelt low-end passion. Thank you to Garth Hudson for your musical genius, palette of fills, pads and riffs.

Ate The Rainbow Stew with Merle Haggard.

In the spring of 1983, I was living in Nashville and touring with a country music artist named Tommy Overstreet. I had met Tommy and his band at a gig in Maryland in 1981 at the Liberty Road Volunteer Fire Department carnival, when my band, The Paradise Pickers, opened for Tommy. At that gig, I met Tommy's drummer, Roger Cox, and we exchanged

numbers. When I moved to Nashville in April, 1982, I called Roger and left him a phone message. He called me six months later. He told me that Tommy would be doing auditions in December and that I should give it a go. I did and got the gig. I rehearsed with the band in January and February and played a few gigs in March and April and then headed out on a two-month tour of the West in May.

We moved from town to town in a tour bus. Tommy's was a Silver Eagle. There was only one door, on the passenger side, at the front of the bus. Take a few steps up, and you were in the driver's space. This was a magical space that came alive during the late night and early morning hours, while the band and crew were hopefully sleeping. Our bus driver's name was also Tommy. He was from Barstow, California. Thankfully, he was a good driver. Sometimes I would sit in the passenger seat during those late night, early morning hours when I couldn't sleep. I learned the meaning of "white line fever." Moving further along on the bus, just behind the driver's space, was the lounge. This was where the band and crew would hang out during the day and have a poker game in the evening. There was also a TV where you could watch movies, a microwave to heat up a burrito and windows where you could watch the highway as it goes on forever. Behind the lounge was the bunk area. It had at least five bunks considering Tommy's band, that featured Roger Cox on drums, Kenny Johnson on bass, Dennis Paine on guitar, Jerry Kennedy on keyboards and yours truly on guitar. There may have been six bunks because Tommy's son, Tommy Overstreet III, traveled often with us as crew. We called him Tee-Three, or T3. We called his Dad Tee-Oh, or TO. Our bus driver was just called Tommy.

The bunk area also had a privy. Each bunk was about six feet long by three feet wide by three feet tall, a bit coffin like. They had a light for reading and an air vent, like you find on an airplane, for fresh air, fresh from the highway. I remember thinking that this was one of the ways you could catch "rambling fever." TO's bunk was in the very back behind a door, making it private. I can't remember a time when I visited that private bunk area. My time was spent either in my bunk, which was the top bunk on the driver's side, the lounge or the driver's space. I remember reading loads of classic novels in my bunk. On that first longer tour, I read Jack Kerouac's, *On the Road*.

We left Nashville one cool, spring evening, crossed the Mississippi River (my first time) and headed for our first stop, College Station, Texas. The venue was called, *The Texas Hall of Fame*. I remember it being a massive Texas dance hall, where the saw dust covered a hard wood floor that accommodated what seemed like a thousand dancers. There was a song popular at the time called, *The Curly Shuffle*, and I remember the dance floor being packed with folks dancing the two-step like I've never seen before. Each duo of dancers would be side by side, arms crossed and holding each other's hands or forearm. There were hundreds of couples going around the dance floor clockwise. That evening was just magic. I was playing guitar in a country music band performing in Texas at a dance hall bigger than the moon. I was getting paid a living wage and a per diem to do something that I loved to

do. I kept pinching myself that night after the gig as we headed down some Texas highway going to the next town, every turn of the wheel taking me to new ground.

On that tour we performed at a couple of Texas dance halls, a used car lot opening, two rodeos, an engagement party on an Arizona ranch so expansive that they used twenty-seven cowboys and two helicopters to keep watch and run the ranch, a few music clubs, a horse racing track, a few resort area entertainment complexes and a Native American Navajo reservation . It was my first rodeo.

We worked our way west through Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and finally into California. When we entered through the checkpoint in Needles, California, the thermometer inside the hut where the border station was said 126 degrees. This was on Interstate 40 in the late spring. It was my first visit to the Mojave Desert. The border agent did a walk through, and after a short visual, they let us pass into California. We played in San Diego, Santa Ana and Bakersfield. We worked our way up to Northern California where we were booked to perform for four nights at a resort on Lake Shasta called Silver Thorn near the town of Redding. It was mid-May. The air was crisp, and the lake was ripe for a clear water revival. Our accommodations were on house boats. One day we took the house boat out on the lake and went swimming, jumping off of the roof into the clean, cold water of Lake Shasta fed by the winter snow melts of Mt. Shasta.

The first night at the club at Silver Thorn was one of the most memorable gigs of the tour. We had a guest sit in with us for our second set, the owner of the resort. His name was Merle Haggard. Tommy had told us that he got the gig there because he was friends with Merle. Merle played a few of our songs, sitting in on guitar, and then sang a few of his songs. We did *Workingman's Blues*, *Today I Started Loving You Again* and *Swinging Doors*. That was the first of four nights that Merle would sit in with the band. We were fortunate that Merle wasn't on the road at the time. It felt like I was in a dream, California Dreaming.

One morning, I woke early to go out for a run. The one way out of Silver Thorn was a winding, ascending climb, and it had me working hard at 5:30 am. I made it out of the resort and into the wilderness of those hills. In those days I could run for ten miles if I had the time, and I did that morning. I was planning on at least an hour of running. I was about ten minutes into the run when I heard a strange sound. Something in the woods was letting me know that this was not my territory. I reversed track. I believe I had crossed into a mountain lion's space, and he or she was not happy about it. I headed back to Silver Thorn pronto, looking over my shoulder every few seconds.

Though I was ten minutes into my run, it only took me five to get back. Needless to say, my pace had jumped considerably on my escape from the wild kingdom. I was grateful having all of my limbs and fingers still attached. Can you tell I'm a bit of a city person?

Back at Silver Thorn, it wasn't quite 6 am, and the restaurant had just opened. I decided to have a coffee and some breakfast. The place was empty except for one customer. At a table

sitting there alone, having coffee was Merle Haggard. Since I had met him the night before, I was able to say hello and asked if I could sit and join him. He said, sure, and we talked about music and fishing, mostly fishing. The menu at his restaurant had some entrees named after some of his songs, one being the Rainbow Stew.

And that is the story of the morning I had the Rainbow Stew with Merle Haggard.

Received a Xmas card from Willie Nelson.

December 8, 1980, was a Monday. I was living in Baltimore and playing with a band called Billy Kemp and the Paradise Pickers. It was a country-rock-roots quartet. We played often in the mid-Atlantic states of Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Virginia. In fact, the name of the band, Paradise Pickers, came from the neighborhood where I grew up on the west side of Baltimore called Paradise, exit thirteen off of the Baltimore Beltway.

The Paradise Pickers were together for five years, 1977-1982, so 1980 would have been the middle period of the band and probably at the height of its music making. The band worked four or five nights nearly every week of the year. We were probably doing two hundred shows annually. It was an exciting band with great musicians supporting many of the songs I was writing. In 1980, the band would have been my brother, Doug Kemp on drums, Jack DiPietro on bass, Brian O'Doherty on piano and myself on guitar. The band recorded one album in March, 1980.

My grandfather, a retired attorney, was booking the band, and he was in conversation with many of the venue managers and owners where we performed. One manager/owner, Reggie Van Zant, from Harrisburg, PA (The Open Hearth, The Countryside), had suggested that we play in New York City at The Lonestar Cafe, the premier country music venue in Manhattan. My grandfather, Bill One, dubbed by Brian, finally managed to book a weekend for the band on Friday and Saturday, December 12 and 13. Weekends at the Lonestar featured two touring roots bands that would play from 10 pm to 4 am, alternating three fifty-minute sets each.

December 8, 1980, was a Monday I have never forgotten. I was over at a friend's house that evening watching Monday Night Football. Sometime in the middle of the game, they broke away from the coverage of the game with a special announcement from Howard Cosell, one of the Monday Night Football commentators. He informed the viewing audience that John Lennon of the Beatles had been gunned down. I was stunned. I played Lennon songs the rest of that week. The following weekend I was in New York City to play The Lonestar Cafe. The city was in mourning.

On Friday night, December 12, we were rockin' at The Lonestar when several members of the Willie Nelson and Family band came in for a drink. They had performed at The

Palladium earlier. They came into our dressing room and hung out with us on the roof of the club where there was a giant iguana. We met Bee Spears, Jody Payne, Paul English, Mickey Rafael and stage manager, Poodie Locke. They enjoyed our band and invited us as guests to come see their shows at The Golden Nugget in Atlantic City the following week. We drove from Baltimore in a blinding snow to make a middle of the week show in Atlantic City. The casino and venue were not at capacity because of the winter storm. It was like Willie and the band were in concert for a select group of friends. We got to hang with the band after the show. We also met Jerry Wexler, who had produced Willie's *Phases and Stages* record, a record I loved, a conceptual work with great story telling.

It was as close to Texas as I had ever been, however, not the first time we had met Willie. We had performed in 1978 at Kings Dominion, an amusement park, near Richmond, Virginia. Our show had been in the afternoon and that evening was Willie Nelson and Family. After Willie's show, I made my way back to his tour bus and said hello and took a photo with the red headed stranger. Then, in the summer of 1980, I met Willie for a second time at the Merriweather Post Pavilion in Columbia, Maryland. He was doing a benefit concert for Jimmy Carter's second bid for the presidency. Jimmy Carter came out onstage at the end and sang "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" with the band. It was quite the celebration. I made my way to the backstage area but secret service was everywhere. I got as close as I could get when one of the secret service persons informed me that as soon as the motorcade left the backstage area, he would let me through. I waved to Jimmy Carter as he went by, and the secret service waved me through. Willie was in conversation with several folks in an afterparty gathering as I waited patiently. I had a copy of the photo I had taken in 1978 and my first album release, which featured a song called, "Song for Willie." It was my turn to speak with the country music legend. He was soft spoken, focused and cordial. He signed my photo with him, "Good luck with all of your music, Love, Willie Nelson." Then I presented him my album with "Song for Willie." Willie took off the cellophane and asked me to sign the record. I think I signed, "Good luck with all of your music, Love, Billy Kemp." We had a laugh, and then he was on to the next lucky person who got to say hello to Willie.

When we said our goodbyes to Willie and Family after the Golden Nugget gig, someone in the Family asked for one of our cards. One week later a Christmas card arrived from Texas. It was a rectangular shaped white card with a drawing of Willie and family, green and red printing that said, "happy holidays from Willie Nelson and Family."

Sang Satin Sheets with Jeanne Pruett.

In 1979, my band, The Paradise Pickers, opened for a country music singer from Louisiana named Joe Stampley. The show was in Baltimore at The Baltimore Civic Center. There were thousands of folks in the audience, perhaps the largest audience I had played for up to that time. We did our set, Joe did his, and it was a big time. There was an after party, and we got to have a hang with the musicians that were in Joe's band. One of those musicians, Ansley Fleetwood, introduced himself to me and told me he enjoyed some of my songs. I thanked

him, and we exchanged numbers. He said that if I was ever in Nashville to give him a call. He also said that he had a publishing company and that he would listen to songs if I had any that I wanted to share with him.

Later that year I sent Ansley a song called "If You've Got Love." He wrote back and said that he wanted to produce a 45-rpm record with that song. I was thrilled to hear the news. Ansley was learning to produce records with Chet Atkins. He recorded the tracks with many "A" team session musicians and the singers who backed Elvis, The Jordanaires. I went to Nashville and recorded my vocal on the record, and Ansley released and promoted the record to country music radio stations. It did well in a few markets and had I had it together, I could have toured in those places and probably made some new fans and sold some records.

Then in April 1980, I moved to Nashville. I knew two people, Ansley and drummer, Roger Cox, from the Tommy Overstreet band. Ansley had offered to let me stay with him for two weeks while I looked for a place to live. I had enough savings to pay rent and living expenses for a few months. One morning, I was heading out to look for an apartment, and I asked Ansley if he had any suggestions. He pointed south and said, "head that way, you'll see some places." I headed south out of Green Hills, found a place called Whispering Hills in Antioch and walked into the rental office. The office manager, Dozy, asked me to fill out an application. I filled it out and handed it to her. She looked it over and said, "we can't move any further on your application, you don't have a job." I told her I had just moved to Nashville, but that I could pay several months rent in advance. She said, "come back when you get a job."

I went back to Ansley's wondering what to do. I told him what had happened, and he said to me, "Billy, what is two plus two?" I said, "five." He said, "You're hired. You now have a job with Brandwood Music Publishing, and your draw is two hundred dollars a week." I said, "Really?" He said, "No, I can't afford to pay you anything, and I don't need another employee. You don't have to tell Whispering Hills that part of the story."

Twenty minutes after I had left the rental office, I went back to Whispering Hills, and walked into the office. Dozy said, "How can I help you?" I said, "Do you still have my application that I just filled out twenty minutes ago?" She said, "Yes, it's right here." I said, "I was just hired by Brandwood Music Publishing, and I'll be making two hundred dollars a week." She rolled her eyes and said, "Go ahead and put it on your application."

Two days later, I was approved for a one-year lease.

Ansley and I remained friends. We wrote some songs together, and he even gave me his Tascam ½-inch 8 track tape recorder after he decided he wasn't going to use it anymore. I still have that recorder, and I am grateful. I found work as a guitarist for Tommy Overstreet,

Terri Gibbs and Bandana from 1983-1987. Ansley left Joe Stampley and started playing for Jeanne Pruett, a member of the Grand Ole Opry, sometime in the mid-eighties.

In the spring of 1986, I got a call from Ansley. He was Jeanne's bandleader, and he asked me if I would be interested in playing rhythm guitar and back-up singing with her band. It had been a dream of mine to play the Opry since 1975 when I first listened to it in my 1960 Rambler on the AM radio. On a good night I could pick up the WSM Grand Ole Opry signal when I parked my car up near the Westchester Community Center in Oella, Maryland near Ellicott City. I told Ansley YES, YES, YES!!!

I played with Jeanne through that summer, fall, and into the winter until December. I played rhythm acoustic guitar and sang back-up vocals. It was goose bumps every night performing at the Opry. I respected the tradition then, and I do today.