

The Wilburn Brothers

Thirteen ways of looking at a Wilburn:
 “Trouble’s Back in Town.” by Warren Zanes

1) THEY WERE JUST CHILDREN, out on the road playing shows, their father acting as manager, driver, and accountant, when country star Roy Acuff heard them sing. It was a set-up. The manager/driver/accountant father, eager to advance his family’s predicament in one of the few ways a poor Arkansas family could, had arranged for his singing children to be waiting outside the backstage door, ready to do an ambush “audition” as Acuff left the venue. When they saw the star emerge, they broke into “Farther Along.” And it was like the whole town went quiet when they started to sing. Acuff stopped, put his guitar case down. Those voices took him somewhere. As Acuff would later remark, there’s nothing like young singers hitting the high notes, not knowing better than to share a little unguarded emotion.

2) “Pop Wilburn started them at home. Believe it or not, he built a stage in the backyard. They’d play for the neighbors.... It was the Depression. He wanted a better life for them than he had had for himself.” —Arvemia Wilburn (wife of Leslie Wilburn, Doyle’s and Teddy’s brother)

3) Acuff’s introduction secured the Wilburn Family a spot on the Grand Ole Opry. A mere six months later, it was in the name of child-labor laws that they were escorted off that hallowed stage. A tough bunch worked the child-labor beat, dogging the halls of entertainment with morality on their side. In the Christian South, fervent morality was one of the few tools that could undo the natural priority



given to business interests. No one was surprised when the Opry chose to keep its doors open rather than fight to keep a little-known family act on the bill. It was an easy decision, handled deftly. Just walk them out the backstage door. Wish them the best. It wouldn't be hard to fill their spot. This was the Opry, after all.

4) Child-labor laws be damned! The Wilburns' was a dream not dashed but deferred. The legal-aged Wilburn Brothers, Doyle and Teddy, would return to the Opry stage again, rising to the top of their game with more than a dozen Top Ten country hits, full-fledged Opry membership, their own television show (one of the first of its kind in color), a successful publishing company (Sure-Fire Music) that handled Loretta Lynn, among others, and a talent agency (Wil-Helm) representing such acts as Lynn, Slim Whitman, Jean Shepard, and Charlie Louvin. Early in their career they backed Webb Pierce and Faron Young. They recorded duets with Ernest Tubb. Zeligs of a sort, for a few decades the Wilburn Brothers turned up everywhere. They even made an appearance on *American Bandstand*. Mastering a craft that was one part musical and four parts entrepreneurial, the Wilburns achieved real success. And then, pausing at that threshold where entertainers who have been at it for a while become the elder statesmen of their field, honored by young and old, the Wilburn Brothers felt the chill of obscurity come into the room.

5) Who?

6) Doyle Wilburn met Margie Bowes when the young Bowes, still a teenager, won a Pet Milk-sponsored talent contest on the Grand Ole Opry. That victory earned her the chance to sing with the Wilburn Brothers, an act she had admired as a girl in North Carolina. In a

short time, Bowes was adopted by the Opry audience, who showed their affection by giving her not one but two nicknames: "The Little Girl With the Big Voice" and "The Cinderella of the Grand Ole Opry." Later, overseas with Acuff and the Wilburns, doing shows for the troops, she fell in love with Doyle.

7) "Doyle could charm the termites out of the walls." —Margie Bowes

8) "Trouble's Back in Town" didn't feel like gold in Dick Flood's pocket. It felt like another good song among the many he wrote and

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then peddled door-to-door along Nashville's Music Row. But good was good enough to take around to a few publishers. And he knew the route well. By his own admission, a fatigue was setting in for the writer/performer, and he was staying awfully busy for a guy who didn't seem to be getting ahead, which wasn't the plan. The near hit was beginning to seem like his specialty. That's a Flood original on the b-side of Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely." Another song, "Three Bells," hit Number One the year Flood recorded it. But not Flood's version. His got lost somewhere below.

He knew that the Wilburns would be at the Sure-Fire office the day he took "Trouble's Back in Town" to meet some publishers. He figured he'd start with them. He thought of the Wilburns as friends, though he wasn't so green as to think that friendship alone got songs recorded. Sitting down with Doyle and Teddy Wilburn, borrowing a guitar to run through the song, Flood gave the most convincing performance he could. And, fate catching him by surprise, he watched the brothers go from listening to the new

song to taking the guitar back just so they could learn it on the spot. The harmony they sang wasn't anything they labored over. It just happened. That was the way with some brothers.

Months after he played "Trouble's Back in Town" for the Wilburns, Dick Flood heard his song on the radio. The recording hit the Top Five. It was 1962, the year of George Jones's "She Thinks I Still Care" and Patsy Cline's "She's Got You." Sometimes it almost seemed easy. "Trouble's Back in Town" would go on to be the song that the Wilburn Brothers performed at the beginning of every one of their TV shows. Once they

even invited Flood onto the show to play the tune himself. Was it a thrill for the writer? Yes, of course. It was also about time. The wait had worn him down.

It was roughly a decade later, while going through his second divorce, that Flood weighed his successes against his situation and, after a few seconds' deliberation, left Nashville. The writer of "Trouble's Back in Town" took himself out of the game. One hit, a lot of famous friends, and a handful of misses weren't enough anymore.

9) "I'd met the Wilburn Brothers years before that. And I certainly knew their music before that. I mean, when my duo, the Country Lads, played weekdays on *The [Jimmy] Dean Show*, we'd always be looking for material: Louvins, Wilburns, Johnny and Jack. You know, duets. The Wilburns were very, very nice people. God love 'em. Good people. Christian people. Years after 1962, my little band backed them on their tours. I'd MC, tell some jokes...what's that? No, I can't remember any of those jokes." —Dick Flood

10) After a year-long stint in the Everglades, sleeping in his tent—"I did not want to be found"—Dick Flood pitched that same tent in Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp Park. The only human inhabitant. Years later he referred to it as "swamp therapy," insisting that when he settled in the swamp he'd

finally found the place God wanted him to be. If you grew up in Georgia around the time Dick Flood was living there, likely you knew him by another name: Okefenokee Joe. He went from being a guy in a tent getting over a divorce to being the animal curator at the Okefenokee Swamp Park to being a personality on Georgia Public Television, admired for his collection of snakes and the love songs he wrote for his swamp. Everyone called him Okefenokee Joe. One female admirer put it thusly: "If you were a guy, you wanted to be Okefenokee Joe. If you were a gal, you wanted to *have* him." At home in the world, Dick Flood almost forgot who he'd been.

11) When *Coal Miner's Daughter* captured the world's attention, the story, if beautifully told, made no mention of the Wilburn Brothers. The role they played in launching the career of Loretta Lynn is missing. How does one explain the conspicuous absence? Were the Wilburns paying a price for the fact that Lynn had signed her publishing rights away to them at the start of her career, leaving them in an enviable spot? Or was it just the movies and the simple

fact that you can't fit it all in there?

Margie Bowes, wife of Doyle Wilburn, recalled her husband's return from the film's premiere: "He was crushed. But he was man enough to let it go. We all love Loretta Lynn, but I don't know how she can say they didn't make her career."

12) In the 1980s, something shifted in country music. The bloating and fatigue of the industry inspired a backlash of sorts, if only a well-behaved backlash. Performers like the Judds and Randy Travis seemed to be working to recapture some of the sounds that had made Nashville proud. But they did so at a moment when the folks who had made those sounds in the first place, many of them alive and still playing, were little more than the ghosts that haunted Music Row. Pete Drake, known by many for his appearances on albums by Bob Dylan, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr, but who was raised on country and never fled his homeland in the night, couldn't reconcile himself to the situation. He loved country music and country music loved him. It has been said that Pete Drake made the pedal steel tell its life story every time he played.

Together with his wife, Rose, Drake dreamed up the musical venture that would be his last: First Generation Records. As Rose would later describe it, First Generation was a "project of the heart." And the Wilburn Brothers would be a part of it. Drake started cutting records on his heroes, on the men and women who gave him a shot when he wasn't yet Pete Drake. Ernest Tubb, Jean Shepard, Ferlin Husky, Jimmie Crawford, and others found a home on First Generation. In a business that often eats its young, Drake was doing something a little different.

When they re-cut "Trouble's Back in Town," the band included Bob Moore, who played bass on the original version, Jerry Carrigan, and "Pig" Robbins. By all accounts, Doyle and Teddy were in good spirits. As usual, Teddy was the quiet one. Doyle would die of cancer the following year. As Rose Drake describes it, "Teddy was lost without Doyle. He still worked, still worked the Opry, but he wasn't the same."

13) "Teddy always stood on the left. Doyle on the right. Then they'd switch it out and you couldn't even tell—they looked so much alike." —Margie Bowes ★

Track 21 Trouble's Back in Town Artist The Wilburn Brothers Written by Dick Flood Credited Musicians Doyle and Teddy Wilburn (guitars, vocals), Bob Moore (bass), and unknown others Publisher Credits Sure-Fire Music Company, Inc. (BMI) Courtesy of Universal Music Enterprises From the Album *From the Vaults: Decca Country Classics 1934-1973* (MCA, 1994), originally released on the album *The Wilburn Brothers* (Decca, 1957)

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