

Illustration of Lefty Frizzell by Lisa Phillips Owens | ©2012 Lisa Phillips Owens

Lefty Frizzell: A Story of a One of a Kindness

by Lee Owens

I grew up in a household very different from most middle class homes. My dad never went to a regular job. He stayed behind closed doors in a converted double garage with other men armed only with musical instruments and their minds writing songs around the clock to supply many of the country music hits of the day.

Our existence was very removed from that of other families. I never once considered that people went to work and had regular lives. All I knew, through osmosis, was if your talent was good enough, you could make money with it. I was sort of “born to

the breed” someone said once.

People in show business came in and out of the house on a regular basis, and on many occasions, I accompanied my father on business trips into Nashville where so many adventures happened they would fill ten books. I

don't really like to tell tales on people, so I have kept my silence about most of them except in the circles of family and music business acquaintances. It is bad manners to gossip about people. The shelves of libraries are littered with a thousand *tell-all* and *mommy-dearest* books, and frankly, I find it a bit crass and tiresome. To be in show business successfully is an extremely unusual thing. It takes guts and a tunnel vision attitude that is not conducive to family life. That is just plain fact. In spite of this, many people manage to have families. Only some

manage to do so with what could be truly considered healthy family existences. I break my silence now at the urging of many friends because there is an interesting overview of which I had never thought. A duality to this story that is redemptive in many ways and insightful in many others.

The existence was rather like living in some sort of bubble isolated from many aspects of the real world. All of my waking hours were dedicated to learning another sort of music than the type with which my father had been associated. Like so many other Americans, I had been bitten with the guitar craze when the post-Kennedy British invasion of the Beatles had hit the U.S. with the force of a large hurricane. I was only seven then, and we were still a year away from living in Nashville, but it had affected me greatly. After that there was no turning back.

Having been a sickly and introverted kid, I had earlier been affected not only by literature (I learned to read at two), but by Hank Williams, Ray Price, Pee Wee King and His Golden West Cowboys, Frank Sinatra, and Frankie Laine. In short, I lived in my head. So by the time I was a teenager and my father had moved us to Nashville from Waco, Texas and truly carved out a career, I had manufactured a reality that wasn't very congruent with true reality. At that time I truly believed that if I worked hard enough to become a really good writer and singer, *I would get noticed* by the people in the music business offices and do it on my own. Looking back, I can definitely now see just how naïve this attitude truly was.

I knew many of my father's friends and was a constant source of amusement to many of them, because I was so dedicated to the cause at such an early age. However, I never got serious until my mid-teens as far as showing anything I had written to anyone, and I spent a good part of my early teens

lying like crazy, plagiarizing and telling my school friends that I had written songs I had in fact *not* written at all. I was pretty much abnormal in that respect. I think adolescence is a horrid time for pretty much everyone—we all crave *some* sort of acceptance. I took it to some ultra dramatic level, though. In retrospect, I think it was because no one in that circle of my father's friends—including *him*—would have ever understood or accepted the kind of music I was creating on my own, in secrecy. At 15, when I eventually did show some of my work, to my astonishment, people seemed to think it showed maturity beyond my years. This was incredibly untrue, but I enjoyed the praise because I rarely

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received any form of it from my father, at least directly.

This gets us out of background information and into my story. My father had many good friends and many co-writers. Some of the people who recorded his songs would even come to the house at times. One of these people was a guy named Lefty Frizzell. To say he is imitated and literally copied by many is a huge understatement. Vocally he is probably the most influential country singer of the twentieth century. This is obvious in the voices of Merle Haggard, George Jones, Keith Whitley, John Anderson, and George Strait, just to name a few. They have all literally copied or mimicked Lefty in some way.

Between 1950 and 1954, Lefty had 14 TOP TEN singles on the national country music charts. *He was huge*. It seemed no one could surpass him. His career had ups and downs in the late fifties but recovered in 1959 with the enormously popular Danny Dill-Marijohn Wilkin song "Long Black

Veil," which became a standard and has been covered by everyone from Johnny Cash to Bruce Springsteen. About five years later, he came back again with another hit that was written by Bill Anderson and Don Wayne (the recently deceased writer of Cal Smith's big hit "Country Bumpkin"). The tune was "Saginaw, Michigan," and it became a signature song for Lefty.

Lefty was such a force in country music that my father, A.L. "Doodle" Owens (<http://www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com/l-o/al-doodle-owens.aspx>) and his partner, Dallas Frazier (<http://www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com/d-g/dallas-frazier.aspx>) wrote a song in 1972 called "Hank and Lefty Raised My Country Soul" about the influence Lefty and

Hank Williams had on people. It was recorded at that time by Emmylou Harris, Stoney Edwards, Moe Bandy and many others. The original "hit" was by Stoney Edwards,

whose record was quite inspiring. Emmylou's version may be found on her first effort, "Pieces of The Sky" (although it didn't make the final cut on the first release of the record in 1972, it was released on the CD version in 2004 as a bonus track, having been part of the original sessions for the album). The song has since been covered by several other people. In the late sixties my father and Lefty became friends, and Lefty began recording many of my dad's songs. His last single before he passed away, "Falling," was written by my father and Sanger D. "Whitey" Shafer.

Much has been written about Lefty and a great deal of it unfortunately has dwelled on his problems. I am not here to criticize anyone else's ideas or remembrances. I just wish to tell a story in which he exhibited so much kindness, encouragement and compassion toward a young man it reminds one of an old Yiddish word that is almost overused. The word is *mensch*. It means a person of integrity and

honor. In my eyes he shall always exemplify that definition fully.

I met Lefty for the first time when I was almost 10. It was 1967, and he had just recorded a song of my father's called "Get This Stranger Out Of Me" for the Columbia label as a single. He was an extremely kind guy who would always take the time to talk to you if you were a kid. I had remembered his name from

a 78 rpm I had as a younger kid called "If You've Got The Money (I've Got The Time)." The record was in a stack of old 78's that my grandfather had given me (along with a hi-fi!) just after I had major surgery at the age of five. Lefty was from Corsicana, Texas, which was just up the road from our hometown of Waco, so there was always a good relationship between my father and him. Subsequently, he was very much fun for me to be around, as well. He

began to show up at the house when he was in Nashville, and I always enjoyed his visits.

There is a really funny story about Lefty and me that dates back to when I was 14. Much to the horror of my

"I am just showing him what not to do when he gets older," said Lefty, laughing uproariously.

mother, Lefty taught me how to spike a watermelon with a fifth of vodka outside of my father's music workroom. He cut a triangular plug out of one end of the melon and poured a quarter of the bottle into the fruit. He then replaced the plug and rotated the melon to the opposite side on the same end of the melon and did it again. The process was then repeated on the other end of the melon. Unfortunately for both of us, my mother caught the two of us

in mid-pour at the fourth hole with the stern, "Lefty Frizzell, are you corrupting my teenager?" She always used first and last names when irritated.

"Why, no Mary Ann, I am just showing him what not to do when he gets older." Then he started to laugh uproariously.

My mom couldn't help but laugh with him and then said, "You two get inside. I have dinner ready. Who wants pork chops, mashed potatoes and green beans?"

"Me!" I said.

"Me, either!" Lefty chimed in his unusual slang, and he carefully placed the watermelon in the rear floorboard driver's side of his car. The watermelon wasn't brought up again after that.

About a year later, I wrote my first couple of serious songs and people began to take notice. Soon after, I wrote two songs that I still like a great deal. To this day, I am somewhat surprised that they came springing from

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...because seeing is creating.

that completely unreal world of my head. One of the songs was about a guy who awoke to a startling realization in the morning. It was entitled “Finding Annie Gone,” and I sort of kept it under wraps. I played it for my dad and he sort of sat there quietly for about three minutes. I never could get a direct reaction from him unless it was critical. He told me Lefty was coming over the following day and urged me to play the song for him when he arrived. I told him there was no way I was going to do that. He asked me to trust him on this one thing. I really didn’t trust him and hardly slept all night imagining myself to be the object of great laughter and much derision the following afternoon.

About one o’clock Lefty arrived and I hid for about fifteen minutes. Eventually, however, I was summoned. When I slowly descended the four steps into the work room, Lefty said, “Play me a song, Pal.” (There were only two guys I ever knew who called me “Pal,” and both of them put me more at ease when they did it...one was Mickey Newbury and the other was Lefty.) I nervously sat at the piano and began to unfold my story as follows.

Finding Annie Gone*

I pulled myself out of a pleasant dream and slowly fell awake
 Keeping my eyes closed within that sleepy haze awhile
 And as I hid from the light,
 I felt for Annie’s body
 And the bedclothes
 were still quite warm on her side

The only vows we ever made
 were recited to ourselves
 And through the years I guess
 their meanings had increased,
 at least enough to let me find
 myself afraid to wake alone
 And afraid I’d wake one
 morning Finding Annie Gone

I got up and pulled my pants
 on and headed for the kitchen
 Stopping only long enough to listen
 to the morning rain

And Mary the housekeeper
 had breakfast on the burner
 And when I asked where Annie was,
 a question filled her face

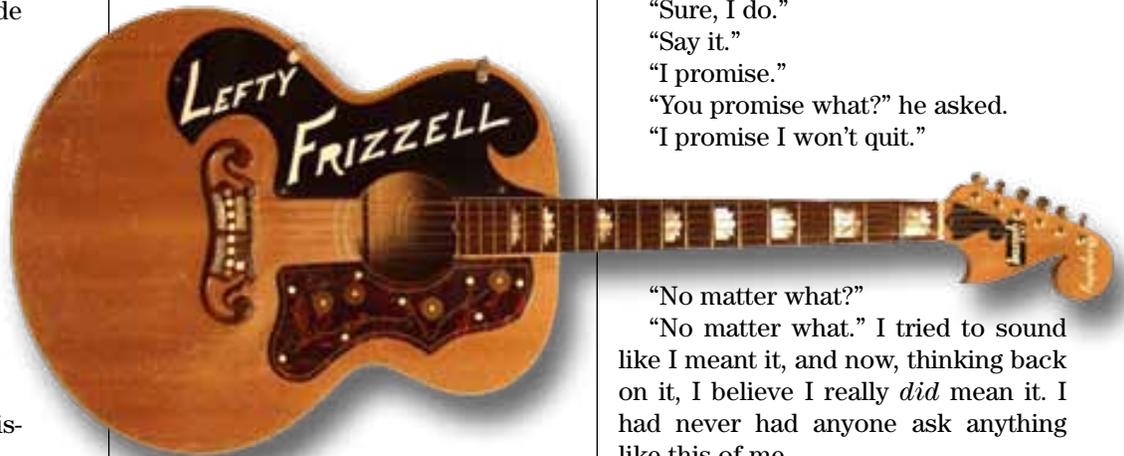
The only vows we ever made
 were recited to ourselves
 And through the years I guess their
 meanings had increased, at least
 Enough to let me find myself
 afraid to wake alone
 And afraid I’d wake one morning
 Finding Annie Gone

Then all at once it hit me
 my Annie wasn’t home
 And Mary said my nice young lady
 hadn’t been gone long
 And suddenly the rain cleared up
 and I looked up at the sky
 And it was the same shade
 as Annie’s eyes

The only vows we ever made
 were recited to ourselves
 And through the years I guess their
 meanings had increased, at least
 Enough to leave me wondering
 how I can go on
 Since I woke up this morning
 to remember Annie’s gone

I pulled myself out of a pleasant
 dream and slowly fell awake
 Keeping my eyes closed
 within that sleepy haze awhile
 And as I hid from the light,
 I felt for Annie’s body
 And the bedclothes
 were still quite warm on her side

When I finished, I nervously waited



a minute before I looked up. Then I looked directly at Lefty. He was openly weeping. I knew he had recently split with his wife, Alice, and he had loved her very much. What little I knew was it was a very private matter to him, and he had been very heartbroken over it. I knew this because he was very matter-of-fact about it with friends he trusted. We were rather like family to him, so we knew. I remember realizing that the song might have stirred up a bit of some of that, and perhaps it did, I don’t know. That is a matter that should be left up to what Jefferson Davis called the “picklocks of biographers.” Then he surprised me, and he wiped away the tears and said, “I want you to listen to me very carefully, and I want you to make ol’ Lefty a promise, now, you hear?”

I said, “Okay,” rather half-heartedly.

He said, “No, no, no...I don’t want you to blow me off, now. I want you to take this seriously and listen to what I am saying, now!” He said this with such conviction I just sat in resignation and nodded. “I want you to promise me that no matter what—*well, no matter what those bastards in those offices uptown throw at you to tell you that you haven’t got a lick of sense or a bit of talent*—that you will not quit playing, writing or singing. Will you make that promise to ol’ Lefty right now? ’Cause we aren’t leaving this room until you do.”

“But why?”

“Never you mind why. I don’t want you getting a swelled head. That was good work. You need to keep working, that’s all. Do you give me your promise that you won’t quit?”

“Sure, I do.”

“Say it.”

“I promise.”

“You promise what?” he asked.

“I promise I won’t quit.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.” I tried to sound like I meant it, and now, thinking back on it, I believe I really *did* mean it. I had never had anyone ask anything like this of me.

“Good...now we can both relax and get on with things. Don’t you ever forget this day, son.”

I always felt a little odd about that day. I was sixteen years old, and it was the summer of 1974. I never could figure out what the big deal was when I was young, but I was certain it was important to keep the promise. Consequently, in some odd way I clung to it through many troubles in my life.

I have kept the promise. There have been, however, *two* sides to the promise. One side can be called the dark and *rather alienated* side. This came from me attempting to deal with real people with functional lives. With myself having grown up in *the bubble*, I had little experience with them at all. It also came from dealing with executives in the music industry whose power madness is legendary.

The other side is the redemptive side. This allowed me to express myself and somehow get emotions out in a hopefully elegant and somewhat individual way when I was so accustomed to living in a world inside my head. In many ways, this provided a needed catharsis and sort of kept me from exploding inside myself.

Once again, from the darker side, I have been avoided, derided, and told to quit. I’ve been labeled “too British,” “too country,” “not country enough,” “too folky,” “too much like the Beatles,” “overproduced,” “too retro,” and generally everything the executives didn’t want.

On the personal side, I have been divorced, and I’ve watched so many relationships destroyed they are almost too numerous to count—all because I chose this path. In truth, I simply had no reference point for being able to relate to many normal people for many years. It has taken a very long time and many life lessons for me to integrate myself into normal society and break out from the “bubble.”

Music, on the other hand, *and from the brighter side*, has always been somewhat of a saving grace to me. In retrospect, my promise to Lefty has helped me sail through the roughest times in my life. The opportunity to play and write music has introduced me to some of the most interesting and creative people in the entire world, many with whom I have worked. It has given me the ability to start with nothing but an idea in a recording studio and miraculously—six or seven hours later—to be able to emerge with a living and breathing musical entity.

Hopefully, I have come out of the difficult parts of my life with somewhat of a decent ability to express myself with what is hopefully a good

What it was like to hear him do it in person was so incredibly amazing, there aren't adjectives expressive enough for it.

amount of honesty and descriptiveness to get my point across succinctly. The only thing important (once again) is that *the promise* has been kept.

When I review this promise, my main thought is I did not think of Lefty as a “living legend” at that time. He was just a friend of my father’s who commanded respect, because he had success in the industry. He was an extremely kind man who had a sense of fun and mischief about him. However, his ability to bend a note with such feeling when he sang was indescribable, and I do not exaggerate when I say the following: *What it was like to hear him do it in person was so incredibly amazing, there aren't adjectives expressive enough for it!* I was always impressed with that. That really was something I cherish in my childhood in retrospect. I remember feeling so incredibly sad for him about the breakup of his marriage, because it was written all over him in every gesture and every note he sang. He was devastated by all of that. I just tried

to be nice to him and be his friend as much as a young teenager was capable of doing.

It is only with age that I am seeing the enormous honor it was to have had someone of Lefty’s stature ask me to make this sort of promise. I was just a kid. It was as if he could see my future. It is astounding he knew that many in the industry would not see it as a future for me.

I have been lucky enough to rub elbows with many well-known people in the music industry and even luckier to have worked with some of them. Most, if not all of them, have had a great love and respect of the music itself, first and foremost.

The second thing is my obsession to keep going, *no matter what*. I suppose Lefty knew that I had that, or at

least would eventually have that. I think he wanted the promise that he extracted from me to serve as sort of an advance gift—one to give me a leg up. He knew

I was too green to really see what he was saying, and it would take years and experience before I understood it fully. My life is all the better for it, in spite of all the ups and downs.

One important thought to remember about those of us that play music... *many of us can not help being removed from the realities of normal life*. Most of us try our best to stay grounded, but all too often, it is difficult to maintain any sense of normalcy with what we do. In the end, many of us find an answer in some sort of spiritual grounding. Frankly, and at the risk of being dogmatic, I think *that* is the best solution to *all* of life’s ills.

Einstein once said, “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” For years, I thought there was something wrong with me because I didn’t know how to fit in with people who were not in show business. Perhaps my friend Lefty Frizzell knew this fact all those years ago, and that music

would be my saving grace. Perhaps he also knew I needed to keep my shoulder to the wheel and continue, and somehow, eventually this unreal Pinocchio would become a real boy, even if, at one time, it was just a block of wood. Admittedly, blocks of wood shed splinters, and splinters hurt, but most growth as a human being hurts, as well. I prefer to think of myself as a work in progress.

Lefty most certainly was a regular human being, and I am better for having known him. *The promise* I made to him has taught me many lessons, and I am brimming over with gratitude for that summer day in 1974 when music and personal growth really began to get very serious for me. He could sing, and he could think of others. Those are *both* extraordinary gifts. I suppose the biggest lesson of all in Lefty's *one-of-a-kindness* was that in thinking of others, we somehow find solutions for our own problems. This has most certainly proven itself through many difficult lessons I have learned in my time on this planet. It was grand to have a consummate professional there for me when I was so young.

Lee Owens

Hudson, Florida
22 Feb 2012

Author's Note: *Not too many years after I sat down at my dad's workshop piano and played "Finding Annie Gone" for Lefty, I had the opportunity to demo the song in a Nashville recording studio. (Click on www.SouthernReader.com/FindingAnnieGone.MP3 to hear it.) The informality of the performance, due to my teenage nerves in the recording studio, is a perfect example of just how green I was as a musician. What Lefty heard would have been even more raw. It underscores just how kind he was to take me seriously as an artist.*

Web pages for Danny Dill, Marijohn Wilkin, Bill Anderson, Sanger D. "Whitey" Shafer, Lefty Frizzell and Don Wayne are all listed in the Nashville Songwriter's Foundation

Hall of Fame as seen here and referenced before in the links for Frazier and Owens. It is alphabetical and is a great source of information. <http://www.nashvillesongwritersfoundation.com>.

I would be remiss if I did not tell you to look for the work of Mike Copas, Pete Cummings, Randy Powers, Dan Pelton, Rob Callahan, Steve Newton, the late Lee Davis, Steve Hill, Wade Seymour, the late Keith Palmer, Roger Ferguson, Billy Anderson, Dale Brann, the late Dave McCaskell, Chicago Charlie Fink, the late Stanley Hedges, but especially Butch Davis and the absolute genius of Sam Hankins wherever you see songs. I hope you find them. I have worked with or grown up with all these guys. They are all amazing musicians, players and artists. Look for and discover them.

A million thanks to David and Jo Frizzell for their generous time, encouragement and for keeping the sense of family that has run between our two (families) for many years in giving generous permission to write this article. Most of all, all my love and thanks to my dear wife, Lisa Phillips Owens, who did the stellar oil painting of Lefty at the beginning of this article. Some of her work can be found online where you can purchase prints in several different forms. Check out: <http://fineartamerica.com/profiles/lisa-phillips.html>

For the best information on Lefty Frizzell, read his brother, David's book, "I Love You A Thousand Ways." It can be purchased in standard book form or audio book @ <http://www.davidfrizzell.com/merchandise.htm> along with David's great CD's, as well. It can also be had at Amazon.com in book form.

For Lefty's music, in the mid-priced range I recommend two overviews: The best being http://www.amazon.com/Thats-Way-Life-Goes-1950-1975/dp/B0002MPQN2/ref=sr_1_7?ie=UTF8&qid=1333280017&sr=8-7 as a complete career overview of the hits.

The second being http://www.amazon.com/Look-What-Thoughts-Will-Do/dp/B000002AD4/ref=ntt_mus_ep_dpi_2 which is a very good look at his early and middle career. By far the best and most exhaustive collection is for the audio enthusiast; it has many songs that were actually unreleased that my father wrote, including my favorite from the late career; "I Wonder Who's Building the Bridge (Who's Getting Her Over Me)" for which I cannot find a release. The collection is the now out of print "Lifes Like Poetry" on the German Bear Family label which can only be found from the wonderful site www.gemm.com (These people can help you find anything). It is a 12-CD set and as far as I know covers everything Lefty ever recorded. Here is the link. <http://www.gemm.com/c/search.pl?field=ARTIST+OR+TITLE&wild=Life%27s+Like+Poetry&Go!.x=0&Go!.y=0&Go!=Search>. It is a wonderful collection.



The Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame Foundation is a non-profit organization dedicated to honoring and preserving the songwriting legacy that is uniquely associated with the Nashville music community. Its purpose is to educate, celebrate and archive the achievements and contributions made by members of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame to the world.

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