

The background of the cover is a close-up of a wooden acoustic guitar. The body of the guitar is light-colored wood, and the sound hole is visible. In the center of the sound hole, there is a white circular graphic containing a vintage-style microphone with four lightning bolts radiating from it. The title text is overlaid on the guitar.

COUNTRY MUSIC BROKE MY BRAIN

**A BEHIND-THE-MICROPHONE PEEK
AT NASHVILLE'S FAMOUS & FABULOUS STARS**

GERRY HOUSE

POSSIBLY AMERICA'S #1 COUNTRY RADIO PERSONALITY

FOREWORD BY REBA McENTIRE



COUNTRY MUSIC
Broke My Brain

GERRY HOUSE



BENBELLA BOOKS, INC.

DALLAS, TEXAS

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*This book is for Allyson, Autumn and Shane, Willa and
Holland, Lucy and Desi, and Charlene.*

Contents

Foreword

Introduction

- 1** Alligator Clip Radio
- 2** The Fights
 - Quizzicle No. 1
- 3** Don't Bother Me
- 4** Country Music Causes Brain Damage
- 5** Johnny Paycheck
- 6** Glossary of Terms
- 7** The Lid Incident and Smoking with a Monkey
 - Quizzicle No. 2
- 8** Baby's in Black
- 9** Garth Brooks
- 10** Gay Country
- 11** Gorilla Glue
- 12** Grand Canyon Reba
- 13** John Rich Gatlin Boxcar

- 14** Kin Folk
- 15** Great Love Stories
- 16** Minnie Pearl, Hank Jr., Phil Walden, and Me
- 17** My Wife Is Cheerful
 - Quizzicle No. 3
- 18** You Never Give Me Your Money
- 19** Mysteries of Life
- 20** The Oaks
- 21** Paranoia
 - Quizzicle No. 4
- 22** Norwegian Wood
- 23** People Who Call
- 24** Randy Travis and Don Williams
 - Quizzicle No. 5
- 25** It Won't Be Long
- 26** Religion and Country and TV Preachers
- 27** Roach for da Book
- 28** Roy Acuff and Opryland
- 29** Sake's Fur and George Jones
- 30** Songwriting and Songwriters
- 31** Showbiz Is Tough
- 32** Don Light, Mark Collie, and Jimmy Buffett
- 33** Trombones
- 34** Sleep, Gretchen, and Charley Pride
 - Quizzicle No. 6
- 35** Why Don't We Do It in the Road?
- 36** The Woods and the Sticks
- 37** Waylon Jennings
- 38** Hunting
- 39** Dogs and Cats

- 40** Broadway and Lower Broadway
 Quizzicle No. 7
- 41** Honey Pie
 Quizzicle No. 8
- 42** Don't Pass Me By
 Quizzicle No. 9
- 43** She Came in through the Bathroom Window
- 44** Available Names Left
- 45** Buddy and Julie
- 46** Shania and Kroger's
- 47** Old Black and Whites
- 48** Italians Do It Every Night
 Quizzicle No. 10
- 49** The Pirate Song
- 50** The Elegant Warriors
 Quizzicle No. 11
- 51** Fool on the Hill
- 52** White Is 1,000 Colors
- 53** Marriage
 Quizzicle No. 12
- 54** Here Comes the Sun
- 55** The Flatts
- 56** Taylor Swift
- 57** The CMA
- 58** The Mother of All Headaches

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Index

Foreword

I'll NEVER FORGET the first time I met Gerry House.

I was doing a radio interview with him in the '80's. He had on a white shirt and a bow tie. It was fairly early in the morning. I was wondering after a few minutes of talking with him, *has this guy been up all night?*

After leaving the interview, I told my publicist, Janet Rickman, "That guy won't be around very long." Little did I know, not only did he stay in the radio business for many years, I would also be recording a fun, toe-tapping song he had written, called "Little Rock." And I certainly didn't know we would go on vacations together, us, along with Gerry's wife Allyson and my husband Narvel, and surprisingly enough, we all became close friends.

Gerry is a very talented writer, with a cool sharp wit. I love to listen to his stories. They can hold me captive for hours. When I hosted the Academy of Country Music awards, Gerry helped me with my scripts. I couldn't have done it without him.

In 2003, he scared me to death when he had to have brain surgery, but I think it helped. I love Gerry—always will—and can't

thank him enough for sharing his warped sense of humor with me, his lovely wife, Allyson, and their daughter, Autumn. They have always been a tight family – a great example for all of us to learn from.

I invite you to sit back and read all the silly, funny, heartfelt things Gerry has to say. I know you'll be thoroughly entertained, as usual.

Love ya,
Red (a/k/a Reba)



Introduction

IT BEGAN IN KENTUCKY in 1958. I was ten. At the time, I was little more than a life-support system for freckles. If I look back at pictures of that era, I had the exact physique of a praying mantis. All I really cared about was the Cincinnati Reds' batting averages and my pets, Petey and Thumper—a parakeet and a rabbit. Both were lost in tragic freezing accidents. I do remember Petey being more fun postmortem than when he was with us on Earth. I could hop him around easier.

My father, Homer, was an electrician. My mother, Lucille, was an electrician's wife. Dad kept the Kroger Company's lights on. He was good at his job except at home where, for some reason, our lights dimmed when Mom started the washer. I was always being instructed about the ever-present dangers of electricity by my dad. "Be careful, Hoss," he'd say, waving a pair of pliers around like a wild man. "Electricity is just like a snake. You never know when it will bite ya." One time during a electricity lesson, he accidentally touched some "hot" wires with the pliers, and a ball of fire shot out of the wall. It sounded like a cannon went off, and it blew both of

us across the room. My dad's hair was steaming and his eyebrows were gone. Good job, Pop! Love the danger demo. Actual fire and smoke!

Technically, it began on a summer day in 1958. We were going to take *the vacation*—the one golden week of the year when my father wasn't avoiding electrocution. We would just "take off." It was planned and discussed for months in advance, but we would just "take off" to the same place every year—the Smokies. The Valhalla of tourism. Yes, that special land of dreams 300 miles due south on the Dixie Highway. Don't you love that name, the Dixie Highway? It just sounds like the road to heaven, doesn't it? Sweet jubilation chilluns, we done got on da Dixie Highway. I should mention the Dixie Highway was pre-interstate. It was also pre-restaurants, gas stations, and rest stops—just one tiny burg after another, like an endless stream of stop signs and yard sales. But still we were on our way to the Smokies! Gatlinburg! *The* home of tiny motels and cheap food and "beautiful vistas of mountain peaks and verdant valleys" that all looked exactly alike!

Now, my father's main goal in life on every vacation was to *make good time*. It was all about beating the previous year's record of pushing the Chevy Bel-Air toward Mountain Mecca. Hurry up and whiz and get back out here. We're behind on last year's good time. Good time meant that you hunkered down. We never actually did the "coffee can" pit stops, but only because Mom flat refused. So it was Dad driving, mom in shotgun, and me clinging to the back of their seat perched on the hump that ran through the car floor. Our first objective was to make it to Renfro Valley, Kentucky, in time for breakfast. One hundred and thirty miles of back-rattling road that meant we left at Dad's usual "gettin' up" time—four in the morning. We rolled into Renfro like conquering heroes and had the same annual meal around 8 A.M.—country ham, biscuits, and red-eye gravy. My father raved about how wonderful it all was. For those of you who don't know, country ham contains in one

servicing all the sodium you'll ever need for your entire life. The biscuits were usually lukewarm, and the butter, for some perverse reason, was kept on ice in little dishes. It's important to make sure the butter is like a tiny yellow brick in Renfro Valley. To this day, I have *no* idea what makes gravy "red-eye" other than that most of the people in the restaurant had 'em—I imagine from making "good time."

Because we always left on Monday, I will assume it began on a Monday in the summer of 1958. Dad turned on the radio. I saw his eyes light up as he lit up his fifteenth Winston of the morning. Here is how it all started:

Smoke was coming out of his mouth as he exclaimed without turning his head to me. "Hoss, *that* there is the greatest song and the greatest singer *ever!*"

Whereupon Lucille House chimed in, "Honey, that's Hank Snow." She sorta glanced back. "Your dad *loves* Hank Snow." I wasn't sure if she was in the fan club or not, but it was started now. I could feel it begin to tickle the back of my lizard brain. Something was happening (not as much as puberty that would later rock my world), but I was making a decision! And before I could stop myself, I blurted out the words, "Dad, turn that *down!*"

It was country music. It was the Singing Ranger and his huge smash "I'm Movin' On."

(Not to be confused with the Rascal Flatts song, "I'm Movin' On," to which I would also have a connection years later.)

At this age, I was vaguely aware of Elvis and a few other songs, but this was definitely *not* anything I wanted played near me. The Hankster had a certain vocal quality that would make any goose proud. He had a bleating honk so pronounced that flocks of his fellow vocalists would follow the car if you turned the radio up loud enough. This was *not* for my ten-year-old taste. Homer House loved it. I did not.

I should explain my three musical influences up to this point.

First: Church. I played the piano every Sunday at the Banklick Christian Church, starting when I was seven and had to sit on a phone book. Across the aisle was Lily Mae Scott, a large-boned woman who wrestled with some contraption called a pump organ. She worked the pumps with her feet and forced air through the tortured instrument 'til the choir could kick in and really nail "Bringing in the Sheaves." With Lily Mae pumping away like Lance Armstrong and me struggling to remember what the dots on the music meant, we were a force to be reckoned with. I'm certain it sounded like a train wreck, but nobody seemed to complain. The choir was usually about half a verse behind us.

Second: Pleasure Isle. Pleasure Isle was neither a pleasure nor an isle. It was a massive concrete swamp that measured 100 yards long and 175 yards wide. The water was pumped right out of the creek beside it and was purified by the Iranian owner riding around in a motorboat pulling a bag of chlorine. In the '50s in Northern Kentucky, it was the Riviera. *The* place to be. My mom and all the moms and kids went there every day. Now, remember, this was before they invented skin cancer, so we all slathered on baby oil and iodine and roasted in the summer sun 'til we looked like minstrels. Pleasure Isle had a jukebox that blared the same twenty-five songs over and over through the worst speaker system in America. Those songs are seared in my brain with a musical branding iron. Elvis. The Everly Brothers. "Volare." Ricky Nelson and something called "The Purple People Eater." I still *hate* that damn ditty.

Third: Mrs. Riggs. My third musical influence was my piano teacher. I don't remember exactly when I started lessons. I've blocked it from my memory like abductees and people married to Madonna do. All I remember is I could never play

my weekly assignment to her satisfaction. Mrs. Riggs was an imposing woman. She dressed in Early Librarian in a house that always smelled like mothballs. With her glasses on the end of her nose, she endured my keyboard technique and clucked signals of disapproval. I still haven't recovered from those sweat-filled afternoons. Grunt, hmmph, tsk, tsk, tsk. "Young man, did you even open your lesson book?"

Looking back, I'm certain Mrs. Riggs trained with the SS and had barely escaped through Poland to hide out in Covington, Kentucky, disguised as a piano teacher. To this day, I can barely read sheet music. The dots are connected to Mozart somehow, but it "don't come easy," as they say. All I remember was the "Eyetalian" musical word for slow was *lento*. I swear she said *lento* a lot when she talked about me to my parents.

Thusly formed, I decided that Country & Western music, à la Hank Snow, was not to be my musical preference. It didn't speak to me. I didn't "dig" it. It damaged me. My drain was bamaged.

Today? I love to hear a good Hank Snow record. If I do, I'm back to being a little peezer in the back seat of an old Chevy making "good time" with Mom and Dad on the way to the glorious Smokies.



Alligator Clip Radio

I'M NOT SURE what makes some people drawn to radio. The “golden age” of it all was before my time. I studied and was influenced by all that later in my career, but what really hit me was live/personality/Top 40/transistor radio. I have friends who even today ride around in their cars, listening to jingles and commercials from that era. I don't do that. That would be nutty. I just write about it.

I have two distinct memories of my early radios: the transistor and the Rocket. The transistor was from Japan. It had a distinct smell I remember, and still I have no idea what that is today. But I was always aware that when I took the back of my transistor radio off to insert the battery, it had a “Japanese/transistor-y” odor all its own. I carried my Japanese transistor with me everywhere. I actually expected Japan to smell like that when I visited Tokyo decades later. It kinda did, I think.

The Rocket radio was even more basic. Again, as usual, I have no idea how it worked. Even to this day, I don't understand how people speak into a “can” (*O Brother Where Art Thou* ref.) and how it comes out the other end to a listener.

I am stunningly ignorant of what an actual transistor even is. I know when your cheap transistor radio died and went to radio heaven, you pulled out all the parts. It always had a flat piece of plastic with little things soldered to it. The Rocket radio had, I think, a diode. Don't even think of asking because I have no idea about that, either. I guess it's what the old-timers called a "crystal set." The antenna came out the top of the Rocket, and you attached the radio with an alligator clip to your bedsprings. It picked up powerful, 50,000-watt radio stations you heard through your earpiece. It was pure magic.

I was hooked. I listened to my transistor radio all day and at night plugged my earpiece into the Rocket, hooked the clip to the bed, and fiddled with the antenna 'til I got something. More often than not, I picked up WCKY in Cincinnati, which played country music at night. Shuddering, I started moving the antenna again. Please, *not* country music. Usually it was all I could get. I don't know why this was so fabulous: a skinny kid in Kentucky listening to music he didn't like at all, over an earpiece that made it all sound like it was coming from Mars. But it *was* fabulous, and I listened deep into the night.

It was exciting, adventurous and, most of all, it was show biz!

When I look back now, I realize I've spent most of my life attached to a radio. I've also done television, live stage performances, and movies, yet radio has always had a hold on me. It's really got a hold on me. *Baby! I love you and all I want you to do is just hold me, hold me, hold meeee.*

That's from a song by the Miracles, who featured Smokey Robinson. It was during an era when songs were played side by side, one after the other. Country songs, R&B, standards, big band, jazz, polka. You name it, and if it sounded like a hit, it got played. Patsy and Elvis and Chubby and Bert and Andy and Perry and Little Richard. There weren't specific "formats." It was all a big, wide open sound. The BBC still does this today, but other than a

vague Top 40 moniker or “Beautiful Music” tag, the stations had a lot of leeway.

Radio footnote: I’ve heard all my career about the good ol’ country music songs that no longer exist today. The Patsy Clines and Conway Twitty classics. How “pop” music has ruined country. In fact, the Patsy Clines, et al., were actually pop hits. People I met in Nashville, such as Brenda Lee and the Everly Brothers, recorded in Nashville and were accepted the world over. They were pop radio stars who happened to be in Nashville. They just did it. The songs and the vocals and the music were POPular all over America.

Nobody thought of them as “country”; they just made great records. Only later did the kvetching start about the downfall of country. In the beginning, Don and Phil were played right alongside Chubby Checker, Bert Kaempfert, and Dion and the Belmonts. *Nobody* ever complained except the folks who liked big band music, and they were certain this new noise was gonna ruin America.

It’s been the same ever since. I often wonder if, when the first teenager stretched an animal skin over a hollowed-out log and began beating on it, his father said, “Turn that down and go kill something for dinner!”

It was also at this age when I noticed something else about radio, in addition to the music, the jingles, and the commercials. *People*. Guys with voices like gold who were joking, laughing, and talking to me. Talking directly to me.

It was *all* guys back then. Oh, there was the occasional TV weather girl who appeared as a guest, but it was a man’s world.

In the ‘70s, I had a radio friend who announced one day, “I think the key to success in radio is to get us one of them animal names.” I thought about it but stuck with my own. The airwaves were populated with animal guys: Wolfman. Coyote. Spider. Hoss. I had no idea people used fake names on the air. Later I heard stories about poor souls who had to assume a particular name

because the station had already spent money having jingle singers record IDs with these names. If the old guy got fired or left, the new guy took that “paid for” name. I guess management thought the audience would think, *Wow, Clark Sullivan sounds like a different person today, but I like Clark, so I’ll listen.*

Technology has changed radio a lot. Nobody hops in their car and hooks up alligator clips to the driveshaft to hear their favorite station. Today, you can get any station anywhere, anytime. But for all the techy stuff, quite often, it still comes down to a guy, or a guy, a girl and a geek, talking to each other and to listeners and playing music.

I knew I loved it, but I didn’t enter a radio station for ten more years. I was just a listener for awhile. Still am, actually.





The Fights

IF YOU DECIDE one day to revisit the house you grew up in, be prepared for the incredible smallness of it all. I don't know if it's a size/ratio thing or what, but everybody always says, "I couldn't get over how tiny the place we grew up in was." Do we expand the size as we get older, or did we just not pay any attention to things like square footage when there was a softball game to be played?

In a tiny house, you have tiny bedrooms. Even then, I felt there was a treehouse feel to the bedrooms in our original home—those bedrooms built in an attic space that wasn't meant for anything but storage. I loved it. On the front wall of both upstairs bedrooms were dormers. Dormers are little construction excuses to have a window sticking out of a roof. I spent many an hour crouched in my dormer. I think it's the reason for my posture today.

My parents had a dormer and two impossibly small twin beds with the world's chintziest chest between them. On top of the chest, I usually saw a glass of water for mom's "partial plate," an ashtray, and a copy of the church bulletin. The bulletin always had

the latest info about when a visiting missionary would return from the Congo and who was on their bed of affliction.

As a kid, I never went into Mom and Dad's bedroom much except for Friday nights. That was when Dad and I each grabbed a spot on one of the beds, and he fired up the little transistor. The *Gillette Cavalcade of Sports* started, and we were ready to listen to the fight that night.

I know what you're thinking. Listening to a fight is kind of like watching stamp collecting. It's not. When your pa is all fired up about the fight, it's exciting. Plus, you gotta be ten.

Come Friday nights, the Gillette boys sponsored another great match between somebody named Tiger and somebody named Sugar. Boxing on the radio is almost an oxymoron. You can't see anything in the ring. You can't watch someone get knocked out. You can't witness a champ raising his arms standing on the corner of the ring. But you *can* hear and feel and experience it all because of the announcer. The bell, the crowd, the music, and one guy or two recounting the action, blow by blow.

I didn't grow up in the golden age of radio, as it's now called. I heard stories about families gathered in front of the Atwater-Kent listening to Fibber McGee and Molly. I read years later about the fireside chats and the horrors of war being broadcast to America. I only know about two guys in silk shorts trying to knock each other's brains out in three-minute bursts.

Dad and I spent years listening to the Cincinnati Reds as Waite Hoyt "called" the games. It was, however, the Friday Night Fights with my Dad that I loved and that drew me to the sweet science—the mystery that is radio. I knew something was special when it made my dad get so excited he'd leap up on the bed when his favorite boxer knocked somebody out of the ring. Usually Dad banged his head on the low ceiling and experienced a near-knock-out blow himself.

I always say I grew up in the country. I look at maps now and realize I was about 10 miles from downtown Cincinnati. "Over the river," we called it. Kentucky is the country, and I grew up in it.

We had a regular neighborhood gang. My friends all had nicknames like Frog and Moe and Birdie and Mudhole. Frog tried to get out of being drafted into the Army by trying to get flat feet. He leaped off the roof of his house repeatedly in an effort to flatten his pods. Moe, his brother, kept me up to date on Frog's plan. I saw Frog hobbling around every now and then, so it seemed to be working.

Donnie was the neighborhood weirdo. Everybody has one of those guys. He was always laughing at a joke nobody else heard. Ours was the kind of neighborhood where you just walked in the front door without knocking. The kids were a kind of giant village blob, drifting in and out of houses and garages at will.

My good friend Mike and I once walked in on Donnie when he was about 14, hooked with ropes around his ankles. The Donster had this brilliant idea he could pull his legs over his head 'til he could reach his own manhood. We walked in just as Donnie was almost bent in half with his pulley system of ropes and the headboard of his bed. Since I knew zippo about sex at that time, and Mike didn't either, we just accepted this as normal. We stared at Donnie as he was about to achieve some sort of relief 'til he realized we were in the room. Most folks would be either embarrassed or angry to be caught in such a position. Donnie just slowly lowered his legs and asked if either of us had any bubble gum.

I still consider this as the ultimate in cool in handling what could have become a reputation-crashing moment. Not to Donnie. He acted like it was nothing, and so we acted like it was nothing. A lesson learned: pick yourself up, or in Donnie's case, lower your legs and pull up your pants, and move on with your life.

Life was nothing but one long float on an old car top made into a raft on the creek. A pickup basketball game or softball challenge.

It was tramping through the woods and sleeping in lean-tos in the front yard. We had floods and power outages and a few shootings mixed in forexcitement, and it all seemed completely normal. It was.

Cincinnati, Ohio, during my childhood was filled with media stars. If you were on the radio or television in the '50s and '60s, it was a golden time. I still see the influence of those early pioneers on David Letterman even today. Paul Dixon did a local early morning show and was very funny. Ruth Lyons was a legend. However, it was the radio jocks that got to me. WSAI, WCKY, WLW, and WKRC had talent for days. I was raw material absorbing how to doradio without even knowing I was being taught.

My high school was typical of that area—a country school that was no match in sports for the city schools. I hear people talk about the difficulties of adjusting to high school. Oh, the angst and pain of the teenage years. I'm sorry, but I reveled in every second of it. Band, basketball, clubs—it was all a total blast. Obnoxious, I'm sure, but nevertheless true.

Dusty Rhode was a DJ on WSAI, the station all the “kids” listened to every waking moment. For the embryos reading this now, I will explain how Dusty came to walk among mere morals. He had the coolest name in the world, he was young and good-looking, and he was on the radio. He was a star!

Dusty came to my high school for a sock hop. Sock hops were the hormone-infused dance parties from the early days of rock 'n' roll. There is nothing more valuable in the world than the gym floor of a high school. The wood is apparently some kind of rare African rosewood that must be protected at all costs. Walking on it in shoes would ruin this protected and highly polished collection of planks, and thus, “sock hops” were invented. Kids could hop around on the floor, flailing to music, but only if they were wearing their finest white cotton footwear. Shoes were verboten.

To celebrate a sports victory, be sure to have one of the biggest celebrities known to man in honor of the occasion. At the time, I

never realized what Dusty Rhodes was required to do. Dusty drove the winding country roads to a hick-filled high school on a Friday night. He was by himself, so he had to haul in some old speakers and an amp to produce some noise. He had boxes of 45s and some radio station junk to give away. Dusty was probably in his twenties and getting twenty-five dollars for the opportunity to watch acne-ravaged, dance-challenged hillbillies leap to and fro. “Louie, Louie” blared from the speakers, and we twisted and shuffled in our stocking feet in what seemed like heaven. Dusty was amazing. He’d ask, “Are you all having a good time?”

Are you kidding, Dusty? What could possibly be better than this? Every 15 minutes, he gave away another highly coveted station bumper sticker and ask if anybody had any requests. The guy was a born entertainer. Three hours later, we were exhausted. Dusty was out of stickers, and we were out of time. I had witnessed show business at its highest level.

I imagine the school principal slipped Dusty a five and a couple of tens outside. Mr. Rhodes likely hauled all the equipment to his car and drove home at midnight. Surely, he was as honored to have this chance as we were to have him there. Talk about a win-win for everybody. Years later, I learned first-hand how much of a thrill radio “personalities” get from going to a remote location.

But it was on that evening in a small high school in Kentucky when I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I never walked into a radio studio until I was in college, but it was always my plan... my dream... my future.

The other side of all my tomorrows was also there at the hop. She was blonde and beautiful and a dancing machine. Little did I know that I would still be married to the girl who agreed to a dance that golden evening. Love is a wonderful thing, especially if you can find it while saving a gym floor at the same time.

QUIZZICLE #1

A stylized microphone icon with radiating lines around it, positioned centrally below the title.

Who did I hear say the following: "Pud me dine,
Goh Dim eet. Pud me dine."?

- A) Mary Chapin Carpenter
- B) Hunter Hayes
- C) Michu, The World's Smallest Man



Thanks for checking out this preview of:

Country Music Broke My Brain

By Gerry House

PRE-ORDER TODAY!



[Connect with the author:](#)

