

VOICES IN THE HALL
JESSI COLTER EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guest, Jessi Colter.

JESSI COLTER The prophecy that was given my mother when I was born was that I would be a musician, but I never felt destined to be a star.

Chet Atkins said to me, "What name do you think you should use?" And my father had told tales of Jessi Colter, who was rumored to have been the chief counterfeiter for Jesse James. And I thought that name kind of sounded good. Daddy didn't like it. "No," he says, "that's a man's name." But I used it.

Time passes and situations change, but deep down inside I don't really think you change. I'm still looking at the wonder and the scenery, finding more and more to be excited about.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with Jessi Colter. I

"Why You Been Gone So Long" - Jessi Colter (A Country Star is Born / Sony)

PETER COOPER That was Jessi Colter, singing the brilliant Mickey Newbury song, "Why You Been Gone So Long." Jessi is a remarkable songwriter in her own right. She was the unlikely of outlaws in the 1970s, when she teamed with Waylon Jennings in a leather and lace marriage that produced a songwriting son and a bunch of great country records. Jessi Colter, welcome to Voices in the Hall.

JESSI COLTER Oh thank you, it's a joy to be here.

PETER COOPER Jessi, as a child you were drawn to music, and specifically to the piano.

JESSI COLTER I was. And I began... I guess my mother realized it, I began taking lessons at five and six. Our home, because my mother was a minister, was a parsonage connected to the church and the Sunday school room. So I could go over to the piano and be alone and play and tinker around. And I'd do my homework over there where it was quiet and people weren't coming and going. It was just part of me.

PETER COOPER Was creation involved in that? Were you starting to write little piano pieces and songs?

JESSI COLTER Yes. I did that very early. 11, 12, I had my own little girl band doing the talent shows. They were held in restaurants, in very American simple restaurants. And doing assembly, school assemblies. It was kind of a natural progression.

PETER COOPER Wow. What was the band called?

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JESSI COLTER I don't even remember. I know the name of the song was "The Crazy, Crazy, Crazy, Crazy, Crazy, Crazy, Crazy, Crazy Blues." That was one of the performances.

PETER COOPER And, what were you called in those days?

JESSI COLTER Well, I was Miriam Johnson. That's my name, Miriam. And Johnson was my given name.

PETER COOPER Did you seek a way out of that name, Miriam Johnson? Was that something that you thought about? "Well, when I grow up, I'm gonna take on this other name."

JESSI COLTER No. It didn't occur to me. When I was divorcing after my marriage to Duane Eddy, who was my first husband. When I was passing into Nashville, Chet Atkins said to me, "Well, what name do you think you should use?" He said. And I said, "Well, I'm in the process of divorce, I don't know if Miriam Johnson sounds like something you can process easily." And he says, "Well, do you have a family name, somebody in your family?" And my father had told tales of Jessi Colter, who was rumored to have been the chief counterfeiter for Jesse James. And I thought that name kind of sounded good. Waylon really liked it. And Daddy didn't like it, he said that, "No. No." He says, "That's a man's name." Didn't like it. But I used it. Jessi Colter.

PETER COOPER Yeah. You've used it well. At that point you're talking with Chet about name changes. You're coming to Nashville. Were you burning to be a star?

JESSI COLTER Never thought of being a star. Always knew I'd be involved in music. I never felt destined to be a star. The prophecy that was given my mother when I was born was that I would be a musician, and I only heard about it once or twice, Mother never pushed any of that. But it wasn't gonna be along the line of celebrity. It was more something that I'm walking into now.

"That's the Chance I'll Have to Take" - Jessi Colter (A Country Star is Born / Sony)

PETER COOPER Jessi Colter, with "That's the Chance I'll Have to Take." I asked Jessi about her time in the 1960s, when she met and married Waylon Jennings, who happened to have possessed one of the most powerful voices ever heard in country music.

How do you sing in a household like that? Does that kind of talent and drive tend to make you wanna suppress your own, or does it make you feel comfortable about living music every minute of your life?

JESSI COLTER Absolutely. I would say the latter, because Waylon just adored me, adored my music. He really was impressed with my music. And that made me feel good. And he knew how I believed in his music. It was just a wonderful, respectful vibe between us. And his passion and his drive was kind of in a different form than mine. He was always chasing the songs, I was more internalizing to write my song. And he was a little later returning to songwriting. We'd been together a while, and he and Willie wrote "Good Hearted Woman" one night. And he had a lot of

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that song, and Willie came with a couple of lines. And he wasn't at all secure about his songwriting, and he showed it to Charlie Pride who was the biggest artist at that time, just shining bright. And Charlie was a friend of Waylon's and loved that song, he says, "I'll do that!" And then that made Waylon think, "Maybe I should do it."

PETER COOPER Did you understand innately Waylon's need to be up until three and four in the morning playing pinballs and talking about music and doing this, what looks from the distance of many years, the hindsight looks to be a pretty rough lifestyle like he was running himself ragged. Did you ever tell him just to calm the heck down?

JESSI COLTER Yes, later I did. And I had never seen the use of diet pills more than you would maybe, I knew of people staying up for one night or something. And it was rather frightening in a way. But Waylon had I believe he had an athletic, and he said it himself, anatomy, he could have been an athlete. And it was... You can stay up and lose sleep. If you're really in a project especially recording or something, you can stay up probably pretty easily, most people. I could, and not to... When I cut with Don Was, there was three days we just stayed with it. Drinking coffee, you can do it. And somebody who has a strong anatomy and a man, can do it. And of course, I questioned it. Of course, I was concerned, but then he had come in and slaved for a couple of days and get back up. No, it was nothing that I thought, "Oh, this is a cool thing." No. Never. But it just seemed like what he did, for the most part, he appeared to be working. He was a working man.

And then of course things fell well for him as he began recording and cutting great records, and then of course platinum records, and his mind was just on it. So it just seemed like it enabled him. I don't know if they'd given him Ritalin to start with if that would have done the same thing. And I do think it contributed to his death early, because of sleep deprivation. I think that really had a lot to do with his death. But his worst times were even before me. He was into this pattern. So it modified with me, but then of course with time. And I made a decision, "Look, I can't stand by." And of course it wasn't like I never said anything. I didn't have to say anything. He knew that this was not good. And I had to pull out of it. But as things came around, and he tried several times and it didn't work, to pull out of it, but when it did, I just felt like, his will and God's will turned into the same thing.

And he pulled out of it, and once he pulled out of it, he never touched anything again. Unlike a lot of people who claimed it, he never did. He said, "I'm making a mark for the good for the rest of my life." And he did that. People like to remember the other years. And of course there were times he was gone, and I'm not saying I didn't worry and wonder. But at the same time, he'd come back in, sleep a little bit, would go back on the road, and that was what it was. But his desire, and his deep love for music was what drove him in all of it, for all of his life.

"A Good Hearted Woman" - Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson (Wanted! The Outlaws / Sony)

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PETER COOPER Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, with “A Good Hearted Woman.” That’s a song that sounds like autobiography. Jessi Colter was “a good-hearted woman in love with a good-timing man.” She wrote about that in the memoir she penned with David Ritz: *An Outlaw and a Lady*. I asked her about that...

What is that process like? And all the looking back, does that get painful? Does it get emotional? Is it joyful?

JESSI COLTER It's a little like what people say, right before they die your life flashes before you, and to walk through all of your life and the hurts, the happiness, it's an odd procedure and it's much harder than you would think. But at the same time, you learn. And I learned much from having processed my life with Harper Collins and David Ritz. I learned that my heritage and my mother and her love for me even in my time of rebellion, how she handled it. And I realized that probably empowered me with Waylon and I going through differences of beliefs, even though I loved him more than anyone in the world, it was trying. But I believe what went in to me worked out of me. And then I followed my call of music. So the long answer to the short question you ask, it is. It's difficult. It's not an easy thing. But you just walk through it and see the triumphs. Think about those.

PETER COOPER We're so happy to have you with us today on Voices in the Hall. In a way, though, you're here at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum every day, in a film clip that runs, one of you singing your signature hit, “I’m Not Lisa.”

JESSI COLTER Yes, I was taking a look at that, and I thought, "Oh boy, I was so serious."

PETER COOPER You were serious--minded. I'll bet you felt serious.

JESSI COLTER I did.

PETER COOPER Well it's a serious song. It's a song about trying to convince somebody to pay attention to you and not somebody else.

JESSI COLTER Exactly, it was serious.

PETER COOPER Yeah. Well then you were appropriate. Gosh. When you look back on this footage from more than, well, from 40 years ago now, who's the you that you see in that video?

JESSI COLTER Well, I'm the same person. I don't really think you change. Time passes and situations change, but deep down inside... I once read that you're more or less a mindset age. And I know what age I am, and it's between seven and eight when the wonder... It's the wonder. And I'm still that way. I'm still looking at the wonder and the scenery as I go. Not that analytical. Finding more and more to be excited about. A girlfriend of mine, we were talking, and I said, "Well, what is different?" Of course, there's a few little minor changes on the outside, but the truth is you're a tree and you just grow more branches, is kind of how I look at it.

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"I'm Not Lisa" - Jessi Colter (Jessi Colter Collection / Capitol)

PETER COOPER That was Jessi Colter, with "I'm Not Lisa," one of her most extraordinary compositions and performances. We're here with Jessi on Voices in the Hall.

Jessi, your son Shooter Jennings has become a real force in the music world. And he often works with Dave Cobb, who's produced albums for Shooter, for Chris Stapleton, for Jason Isbell, and many others. Dave credits you and Shooter with bringing him into country music, when he was a kid with a rock background. Did you know what Dave Cobb was capable of when you first met him?

JESSI COLTER Not really, because Don Was suggested him. I went to Don and said, "Do you have any suggestions?" Things hadn't worked out with Tony Brown that Shooter had been cutting here. And he said, "Dave Cobb, why don't you try him?" So, but what Shooter was doing was much more Rock. And Dave was just fun to work with. He and Shooter worked through a lot of different things to come to almost a Southern Rock Country thing. I'm delighted because he's such a good person. I'm delighted to see what's going on. And he's doing a great job.

PETER COOPER He's doing great, and he does abide by, well, the rule that another person you knew very well, Cowboy Jack Clement said, "Remember, we're in the fun business. If we're not having fun, we're not doing our jobs."

JESSI COLTER I know. And Jack was amazing. What a music man. He'd start dancing and you knew, when he started dancing that he felt like it was gelling and coming together.

PETER COOPER Yeah. You'd see him right behind the soundboard dancing around, and he produced what Waylon said was his favorite album, *Dreaming My Dreams*.

JESSI COLTER Right, you're right. You're a good journalist I'll tell you.

PETER COOPER Well, this stuff is written down.

JESSI COLTER Yeah, well. But to find it all and put it together. Yes, that's what he said, he loved *Dreaming My Dreams*. Loved that album.

PETER COOPER This is a man who put out a lot of work and a lot of celebrated work. *Dreaming My Dreams* was something where Waylon no longer had to ask record label people for permissions. And yet rather than just producing the album himself, he calls Cowboy Jack.

JESSI COLTER He heard a sound. I know Allen Reynolds had done some things, and Jack had kind of been experimenting and kind of had a sound. And Waylon was attracted, very attracted to this. He says, "There's something going on." He was attracted to the newness of, from where he was right then. That's what I loved about him too, he didn't have the pride at all that would

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keep him from asking you in to tell him something and help him learn. He really did not have that kind of ego, no matter what people say about him, he didn't. And he loved welcoming somebody who knew more or seemed better at it, and that's how I think he felt about Jack.

And I think it just was a joyful thing. And then "Dreaming My Dreams," that song. When you listen to that song and what it says, it's to get over bitterness, get over anger, get over hate, get over it. And I'll always just remember "Dreaming My Dreams With You." And Waylon had suffered a lot of heartache trying to please the women in his life, and he had pretty much given up when I met him, and I didn't understand the impact of that, I didn't understand that. But I certainly found that out and saw how the women just didn't have... And I don't know why I... Probably because I was artistic. Because he felt like the other women in his life thought the music was another woman. When a man loves something, he needs a wife who understands that love. And I think that's part of what made our love last and better, because I saw that great part of him and never lost sight of it.

PETER COOPER Well the lyrics to that song, they're kind of marching orders, "I won't let it change me, not if I can. And I'd rather believe in love and give it away as much as I can to those I'm fondest of."

JESSI COLTER Oh, man. That's hard to do when you're heartbroken.

PETER COOPER Yeah.

JESSI COLTER It's hard to do.

PETER COOPER Well let's close with "Dreaming My Dreams," the title track from Waylon Jennings' favorite album. Jessi Colter, thank you so much for being here and talking with us here on Voices in the Hall.

JESSI COLTER Thank you Peter, you're wonderful to talk to.

"Dreaming My Dreams with You" - Waylon Jennings (Dreaming My Dreams / Sony)

PETER COOPER That was Waylon Jennings, singing the Allen Reynolds classic, "Dreaming My Dreams with You." That's the title track from what Waylon considered his very finest album, recorded with the great Cowboy Jack Clement.

This has been Voices in the Hall, with the delightful Mrs. Waylon Jennings, Jessi Colter. There's more from my interview with Jessi at Voicesinthehall.org and on our social channels, @VoicesintheHall. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. This podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and it's recorded by Alan Stoker. Come see us at the Museum in downtown Nashville. I'm not Lisa, I'm Peter Cooper. Thank you for listening.