

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. Today's guest, Ray Stevens.

RAY STEVENS You know some people call it work, I call it play. I get up every morning and I've got something creative to get involved in. I love what I do.

There's two parts to writing a song, the craft and the inspiration. Hard part's the inspiration.

Gotta be some angels out there flying around, dropping little ideas onto people from time to time, and I think I was the lucky recipient of one of those.

I enjoy the excitement of creating something that amuses other people, that entertains other people.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with Ray Stevens.

"The Mississippi Squirrel Revival" - Ray Stevens (The Legendary Ray Stevens / Geffen)

PETER COOPER "Mississippi Squirrel Revival," a hit for Ray Stevens in 1985. Ray is my guest today on Voices in the Hall. He's been making music professionally for more than sixty years. He's won Grammy Awards, is a member of the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. Ray Stevens is a singing, songwriting, producing, piano-playing, song-arranging force of creativity.

Ray, thank you for being with us on Voices in the Hall.

RAY STEVENS Thanks for having me.

PETER COOPER You're a good fit around here. This museum is devoted to the preservation of music of you, and a lot of the people that you've known and collaborated with over the years. So, it's nice to have you here in the museum.

RAY STEVENS It's nice to be here. You know, I did kinda grow up with a lot of the folks that are still, their spirits are still here, anyway.

PETER COOPER Yeah. Now, speaking of growing up, who in the world is Harold Ray Ragsdale?

RAY STEVENS Never heard of him. That's my real name, Peter. Well, when I first came to Nashville in 1957, I was 17, gonna make my first record, still in high school, and I came up with Bill Lowery, who was my mentor and my publisher in Atlanta. He was friends with Ken Nelson,

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

who was a very successful producer at Capitol Records. And Ken produced my first record. And when we got through with the production he said, "Ray Ragsdale, I don't like that name, Ragsdale." I said, "Well, what's wrong with it?" He said, "Well, you know, when I was a kid I read a book, and it had a dog in it named Rags." And I said, "Well?" And he said, "Well, I don't know, it just doesn't seem right to me," and I said, "Well, if you change my name, you're gonna make my mama mad." He said, "Well, what's your mama's maiden name?" and I said, "Stevens." And he said, "That's a good name, Ray Stevens." I said, "Wait a minute, how about my father? You're gonna make him mad." He said, "Well, we can't make everybody happy. Do you wanna make a record or not?" And I said, "Yes, sir, you can call me anything you want to." That's how my name got changed from Harold Ray Ragsdale to Ray Stevens. They dropped the Harold automatically, but Ray Stevens flows trippingly off the tongue, you might say.

PETER COOPER It's a lovely name, indeed.

RAY STEVENS Yes.

PETER COOPER When you got here to Nashville in 1957, your first recordings were actually at, what we now call historic RCA studio B. But then it was just RCA. What was it like walking into that place? Did you already feel the weight of history walking in there?

RAY STEVENS No, but I felt the weight of, "This is a real recording studio and I've never seen a speaker that big. And boy, isn't this fun!" Actually, when I did the interview that you're referring to, and I said it was RCA B, it wasn't. It was the first RCA studio that was over on McGavock Street, behind Beaman Pontiac, and it may not be Beaman Pontiac now. And it was next to John Wash Canon's Grill, which is no longer there. It looked, on the inside, it looked a whole lot like the RCA B that is still there on the 17th. And so my memory didn't serve me well when I gave the interview and that got into print. But after that, people have reminded me, "No, it was the one on McGavock."

PETER COOPER Yeah, which was the first place Elvis recorded in Nashville.

RAY STEVENS Was it?

PETER COOPER As well. Yeah. At first in Nashville, were you making a living more as a recording artist or as an enabler for other recording artists?

RAY STEVENS My living was made back in those days primarily playing piano, and whatever else was triggered by a keyboard in the studios, on all the Mercury sessions and a lot of the other labels would hire me. Chet used to hire me and...

PETER COOPER Chet Atkins at RCA?

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

RAY STEVENS Yeah. And Owen, and the other producers would hire me to do things. Jim Vienneau at MGM. But I had a great time during those years.

Of course, I moved up January 2nd, and on January 20th, I wrote and recorded "Ahab The Arab," and that came out in the summer of that year, 1962, and was a big hit. I even sang with the Jordanares every now and then. Gordon would call me and...he's nodding his head.

PETER COOPER And the Jordanares, Gordon Stoker you're talking about, who's the father of our engineer here, Alan Stoker, Grammy--winning audio czar.

RAY STEVENS Alan's dad would call me and say, "Hoyt's not feeling well today, can you fill in?" And I'd say, "Sure," and I'd show up and sing that part, whatever it was. I wasn't the only one that Gordon would call, he'd call Bergen White a lot. And Bergen is still around. He and I are great friends. And Bergen back in the old days he would sing with a lot of different background groups. He and I were friends with Bill Justis. Bill Justis was a great musician, terrific arranger, and he taught Bergen and I how to lay out the score paper and fill in the blanks and write arrangements. Of course, I had studied theory and composition for three years at Georgia State in Atlanta, but Bill was the icing on the cake. He really made it all become real because we were there, we were writing it, we were going into a studio and hearing it played back for real, with microphones and people were paying money for this stuff, so...

PETER COOPER Right, you knew theory, but this was application.

RAY STEVENS This was the reality.

"Come What May" - Elvis Presley & the Jordanares (From Nashville to Memphis - The Essential 60s Masters / BMG)

PETER COOPER That was Elvis Presley, with "Come What May." That session took place on May 28, 1966 at RCA Studio B. And a young Ray Stevens played trumpet along with Charlie McCoy, who's now a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Ray, you never claimed to be much of a trumpet player, but it came in handy that May day at Studio B. Your talent on other instruments was evident to others, from your early days. In Atlanta, you caught the ear of Bill Lowery. What was Bill Lowery to you?

RAY STEVENS He was very supportive. He inspired you to wanna succeed, to wanna write songs, and be in the music business because he personified exuberance. And he loved the music business. He started out as a disc jockey in Atlanta. And he developed cancer at an early age and they got it out. But the doctor told him, he said, "You're gonna have trouble getting insurance." So a friend of his, Tex Davis. Tex Davis was in radio up in Virginia and he was a friend of Bill's. All those radio guys used to hang out together. He said, "Bill, you oughta start a

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

music publishing company and that can be your insurance policy." And so Bill said, "Oh, that's a good idea." So he started a music publishing company in Atlanta, the very first one there that I know of, and encouraged all the kids around Atlanta to write songs, because he wanted to have something to publish. And I was one of those kids, and Jerry Reed was another, Joe South was another, Tommy Roe, Billy Joe Royal, Buddy Kalb. We all were so happy to have somebody we could go to, 'cause we wanted to be in the music business, we wanted to write songs, we wanted to make records. And so Bill encouraged us all, and I'm very lucky that I was in that group.

PETER COOPER What was that scene like at Lowery's place? Were people trying to blow each other's heads off with songs?

RAY STEVENS No, it was very friendly. Everybody was rooting for everybody else. We'd listen to each other's songs and comment and criticize and it was a lot of fun.

PETER COOPER What kinds of songs were you writing at that point?

RAY STEVENS I was writing... Well, I wrote "Ahab the Arab," "Jeremiah Peabody's Polyunsaturated Quick--Dissolving Fast--Acting Pleasant- Tasting Green and Purple Pills." You know, just whatever would come to mind.

PETER COOPER So you were funny already?

RAY STEVENS Well, I also wrote love songs and so--called straight songs, but the ones that seemed to click for me, back in those days, were the comedy songs.

PETER COOPER When people talk about Ray Stevens, sometimes they'll say, "Well, yeah, I know he's funny, but he's also a great musician," as if these things are to be set apart from each other. Did you ever find that your comedic side distracted from your serious songs or from your talent?

RAY STEVENS Not in my mind. Now, they may have been confusing to other people, but I didn't think about that.

PETER COOPER I never hear funny songs on the radio these days. That doesn't seem to exist. I might hear silly songs, but I don't hear funny songs. Why was there a greater acceptance of humor in popular media at that point in the '60s and in the '70s?

RAY STEVENS That's a good question and I have thought about that. I think it's just a phase we're going through. I think people still like to hear a clever song, and I've got a ton of 'em. I'm waiting for the day to come when radio will realize that not everything has to sound alike.

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Back in 1974 one song of yours that didn't sound like anything else on the radio was "The Streak." How'd that come about?

RAY STEVENS I was reading a magazine, and in back they have these little blurbs about news events that week, and one of those news items was about a college student in California who took off his clothes, ran through a crowd, and they called it "streaking". And I thought, "There's a new term that I haven't heard, I'll write a quick little song about that." Well, as it turns out, that quick little song turned out to be a huge fad, and by the time I could get my record out there were already a dozen or so other records already on the market about streaking. Everybody had the same idea. And mine was the one that made it.

PETER COOPER Maybe it was the voices you were doing in there. How did you come up with that voice of the guy that's just disconsolate 'cause it was too late?

RAY STEVENS That was a fish out of water concept. There's this guy, he just don't know about this. This is all offensive to him, and of course his wife or girlfriend, Ethel. He's going for it and he's all upset.

PETER COOPER How do you direct musicians in songs like that that seem so wacky? Is it easy to explain what you're trying to do in the studio?

RAY STEVENS Oh, yeah. You just write a chord sheet and write over the chords what you want them to do. I mean, you could go on to a full-blown arrangement, but you don't need that for "The Streak," for god sakes. All you need to do is say to the banjo player, "Play the banjo. Play these chords. Do the Earl Scruggs style," and it just falls into place. Pretty soon, it doesn't take but one run through for the band to get it.

"The Streak" - Ray Stevens (Boogity Boogity / Barnaby)

PETER COOPER He ain't crude, he ain't rude, he's just in the mood to run in the nude. That was Ray Stevens with "The Streak." There's a lot more to Ray than just novelty songs. Early on, he was one of the first to pay attention to a young singer songwriter named Kris Kristofferson. Ray, what was Kris like back then?

RAY STEVENS To me, he was kinda introverted, kinda shy, nice guy, very talented, very smart. Bob Beckham was a good friend of mine, and Bob was a music publisher.

PETER COOPER Ran Combine.

RAY STEVENS Yeah, but before that he ran Lowery Music. He recently died, but I had known him since I first moved here in '62. And he had a new writer named Kris Kristofferson. He called me and said, "Raymond, I've got three new songs written by this new kid, Kris Kristofferson, and

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

I want you to hear 'em. You might wanna record one of 'em." And so I said, "Okay, Bob. I'll be by there this afternoon." And so I went by his office and he played me "Help Me Make It Through The Night," "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down'," and I think it was "For The Good Times," it was either that or "Me And Bobby McGee," one of those. And the "Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down'" just hit me right between the eyes. What a well- crafted song. And I said, "Bob, let me cut that." He said, "Great, cut it, son."

So I went in the studio and cut it for Fred, Monument. I spent days in the studio working on this thing because I wanted it to be just right. And it was a good record, I thought. But it didn't sell very good. And later on, I figured out that my image was just not in keeping with the image that that song projected. Waking up on Sunday mornin' stoned, you know, stumbling down the stairs. Johnny Cash had a big hit with it later. Not that Johnny Cash would wake up on Sunday mornin' stoned, but he could get away with anything like that, because he had a different persona, different image than I did.

PETER COOPER Did you ever zig when you should have zagged?

RAY STEVENS Oh, gosh, yeah.

PETER COOPER When?

RAY STEVENS Oh, I had just finished recording "Sunday Morning Comin' Down," and it wasn't out yet. And I got a call from Hal David who writes or wrote with Burt Bacharach. And he said, "I want you to come out to L.A. and hear this song, Burt, I got this song, he's just finishing it up and it's for this cowboy movie." And so I went out, and I went to Burt's house and he played Raindrops, Keep Falling On My Head, you know. And I said, "Well, great, can I call you tomorrow?" And he said, "Sure." And so I got to thinking, "If I record this, I'm gonna have to postpone releasing Sunday Mornin' Comin' Down, and I don't wanna do that 'cause somebody else will beat me out with it." So, I passed on "Raindrops Fallin' on My Head," and he said, "That's fine, that's fine." And he called BJ and BJ cut it.

PETER COOPER BJ Thomas.

RAY STEVENS Yeah. I should have cut "Raindrops."

PETER COOPER Pretty big hit.

RAY STEVENS Yeah. But I couldn't have sung it any better than BJ did.

PETER COOPER I understand your song, "Guitarzan" came about in part because of Bill Justis.

RAY STEVENS Bill Justis was scoring a movie out in LA once, and I was out there doing something. And I'm staying at the Continental Hotel, which is, or it was Gene Autry's hotel on

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Sunset Strip there. And across the street were these apartments and Justis had rented one. He was scoring a movie. And he found out I was across the street at the Continental Hotel. He called me and he said, "Let's have breakfast in the morning." I said, "Great." So he came over and we were in the coffee shop and he said, "I got a great idea for a song, a title for you, you need to write it." And I said, "What is it, Bill?" And he said, "Guitarzan, man. Ha ha ha ha." And I said, "Okay." And so, I flew back to Nashville, wrote the song and recorded it and sure enough, it was a great record.

PETER COOPER Did he have a notion of what the song would be?

RAY STEVENS No.

PETER COOPER Or he just had the title?

RAY STEVENS He just gave me the title.

PETER COOPER How'd you figure it out?

RAY STEVENS I don't know, I just thought... Well, one thing I'd never known about was a rhyming dictionary. I don't know why, but somebody said, "You need to get Clement C. Wood's Rhyming Dictionary." And so I bought one and I thought, "Well, I'll write this song out of this rhyming dictionary," and so I did. It was a great help.

"Guitarzan" - Ray Stevens (Guitarzan / Barnaby)

PETER COOPER You're listening to Voices in the Hall. That was Ray Stevens' "Guitarzan," written with a songwriter's version of a performance enhancing substance, a rhyming dictionary. My guest is the great Ray Stevens.

You followed somewhat in Fred Foster's tradition with Monument Records in establishing your own record label and becoming an independent businessman. Why did you think that was a good move at a time when everybody was looking to hook up and have a major label affiliation?

RAY STEVENS Well when the Internet kinda took over our business, I figured, "I might as well record for my label as any other, because I've got just as good a shot." And so I started Clyde Records. The main reason, though, was because I wanted to sell direct on television. Well, the first product I had was, I think it was on MCA, it was audio. And I believe it was 20 sides, 20 comedy songs. And it sold very well, direct, with the 800 number on cable television. Later on, I wanted to do a video, a long form video and we took eight songs and I went to MCA and I said, "Do you want to pay for these? Because it's gonna cost a lot of money, but they can be on MCA, this long form video." And they declined. They had the idea that videos were just to promote audio records, and they weren't really all that viable as something to sell.

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

So I financed the project and paid for the production of eight music videos, put 'em in a package, put 'em on television. We sold five million of 'em on television. And the spot was everywhere back in '92, '93. I remember I was in Branson at the time, I had built my theater over there in 1990. And when that video hit, we had to turn 'em away. We filled up every show twice a day. Two shows a day, six days a week. It was just amazing, the power of that video ad on television. And in addition to selling five million videos, we sold a lot of tickets to the show.

PETER COOPER And you were paying for advertisements for these that would run...

RAY STEVENS Yeah, but most of them were, back in those days what they called P.I. and that stands for "per inquiry." And even then you can buy the time or the station will gamble with you. And a lot of times, if you've got a hot product they wanna gamble with you 'cause they'll make more money than their going set rate. So we had all this success with the videos. And Time Warner came in, saw this and said, "Whoa. This is a good idea." So they bought all the time from just about every cable channel from then on. It's hard to get spots on TV now per inquiry. But back in those days you could do it. But to get back to the reason for my answer. Your question was, "Why did you start Clyde Records?" and that's the reason. Mainly, I wanted a record label. MCA didn't wanna put it out. So I wanted to have a record label to sell this video on television.

PETER COOPER Worked out all right.

RAY STEVENS It did.

PETER COOPER So you got a building over on Music Row where you can shoot videos, make recordings, and you do a little bit of everything over there. Why are you still working so hard at so many different aspects of the business?

RAY STEVENS Well, you know, some people call it work, I call it play. I call it fun. I love what I do. I get up every morning, I got some place to go, I got something creative to get involved in. And it's just a lot of fun.

PETER COOPER One of the songs that has moved other people for decades now is Everything is Beautiful. How'd you come to write that?

RAY STEVENS Roger Miller was managed by Don Williams, Andy Williams' brother. And the story goes... One day he told Don, he said, "Don, you oughta manage Ray Stevens." And so Don called me and he said, "Do you need a manager?" And I said, "Well, I don't know, I might." He said, "Well, I'm coming to Nashville next week, let's get together." And so we met and I signed with him as an artist. We hit off from the beginning. So Andy's TV show on NBC, they needed a summer replacement. And Don said to me, "You wanna be the host of the Andy

VOICES IN THE HALL
RAY STEVENS EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Williams Summer Show on NBC?" And I said, "What? Are you kidding?" and he said, "Well, great."

So I wanted to write a song that could be the theme for that summer show, and I just locked myself in a room with a piano and wouldn't give up until I'd written something that I thought was good enough to be the theme song for that television show. And it was "Everything is Beautiful." There gotta be some angels out there flying around, dropping little ideas onto people from time to time, and I think I was the lucky recipient of one of those. I was reading a little book of Chinese proverbs. And it had little sayings that are very logical, but presented in a way as to justify them being in a book of Chinese proverbs. And one went, "Everything is beautiful in its own way." And I thought, "Well, that's a good idea." And I started writing, and after I laid out the framework for the song, I knew. I said, "Yeah, this is it." And so I just finished it.

There's two parts to writing a song, the craft and the inspiration. The hard part's the inspiration. Once you have learned the craft, you can apply the formula to a lot of different ideas and come up with a song. And after I got the idea, after about three days, the song wrote itself.

PETER COOPER We've got it here first, Everything is Beautiful, one of the indelible songs in the history of this music, was actually stolen from the Chinese.

RAY STEVENS Haha, not really, no.

PETER COOPER Ray, thank you so much for being with us on Voices in the Hall. It's just a pleasure to have you in this Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I suspect you might have a plaque here one day permanently.

RAY STEVENS Oh, gosh. Well, thank you, Peter. It's been fun talking to you.

"Everything Is Beautiful" - Ray Stevens (Everything is Beautiful / Barnaby)

PETER COOPER "Everything is Beautiful," a hit for Ray Stevens in 1970, and a Grammy winner for him in March of 1971. Ray's daughter, Suzi Ragsdale, sang in the children's chorus on that song.

There's more from my interview with Ray Stevens at Voicesinthehall.org and on our social channels, [@VoicesintheHall](https://www.instagram.com/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. I'm Peter Cooper, and I appreciate you being with me as we explore the lives and careers of the fascinating folks who make music history.