

Cliffie Stone

Cliffie Stone's name may not be a household word, but he's had an extraordinary impact on country music—as a producer, writer, radio personality, record company executive, manager, musician and recording artist.

When Cliffie Stone was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame in 1989, a lot of people didn't recognize the name. After all, it wasn't a household word like Flatt and Scruggs or Eddy Arnold. And people couldn't be blamed for saying, "Who?"

Unlike most individuals profiled here in Legends of Country Music, Stone was not a major, well-known, national recording artist. He had exactly three hit recordings under his own name. Nor did his work earn him Gold records or Grammys. He worked almost exclusively on the West Coast, not in Nashville. So why the Hall of Fame?

Because this year's Hall of Famer, Tennessee Ernie Ford, would never have had his spectacular career without Stone, who managed him through his most successful years. Without Cliffie there would be no Merle Travis, no Molly Bee, no Jimmy Bryant or Speedy West—and no West Coast country music industry as we now know it. He almost single-handedly created Capitol Records' Country Music division in the late 1940's. Mind you, all Cliffie's discoveries weren't country. They also include satirist-impressionist-advertising genius, Stan Freberg, and soft-rock singer, Tommy Sands. And we can be *certain* that without Cliffie, his son, Highway 101 bassist Curtis Stone, would not be here.

Cliffie Stone was a catalyst, a man who made things happen. He totally understood the music business: performing, staging, publishing and recording. Not only could he spot talented performers a mile away, he could mold them without ruining what made them special. He was among the first to see the potential of TV to reach audiences and recognized the value of hit records at a time when many country artists felt them secondary to performing live. The records he produced hold up as well today as they did when they were cre-



PHOTO COURTESY CLIFFIE STONE

Herman's beard and long hair, grown for a movie role and worn more than thirty years before they became fashionable, Hamblen named him "Herman the Hermit."

Cliffie was playing bass fiddle in high school, and in 1935 his dad recruited him to fill in as bassist on Hamblen's two daily radio shows. To cover the fact that Cliffie and Herman were father and son, Hamblen nicknamed him "Cliffie Stonehead." Cliffie even emceed the show on occasion. By the time he'd left high school, he was working on numerous L.A.-area radio stations simultaneously, emceeding, doing comedy, playing records and reading commercials. He kept his stage name, but to boost his credibility he shortened it to "Stone."

In 1942, songwriters Johnny Mercer, Buddy DeSylva and L.A. music store owner, Glenn Wallichs, founded Capitol Records. By signing artists like Tex Ritter, Jo Stafford and Nat "King" Cole, all of whom became enormously popular, Capitol became a major record company in a short time. Still working in radio, Cliffie also played bass on some of Capitol's earliest pop and country recordings, including Tex Ritter's "Jingle, Jangle, Jingle" and "Rye Whiskey." As a bassist he was good enough to perform with the Jan Garber, Anson Weeks and Freddie Slack pop orchestras.

Briefly, in the mid-1940's, Cliffie ran his own label, Lariat Records, which released early recordings by then-unknowns such as Merle Travis and Stan Freberg (Stan began his career doing imitations on Cliffie's radio shows). Cliffie also produced records for the L.A.-based Bel-Tone label. Capitol's A & R Director, Lee Gillette, was impressed by the Bel-Tone records and amazed to find that his studio bass player produced them. Gillette hired him as Capitol's country producer. He not only handled sessions for Tex Ritter, Jimmy Wakely, Wesley Tuttle and Jack Guthrie, he signed

ated over 40 years ago.

Cliffie's—and Tennessee Ernie Ford's—inductions into the Country Music Hall of Fame may prove to be major steps toward reconciling the West Coast and Nashville. For years, West Coast country performers and musicians felt Music City ignored their contributions. It was on the West Coast that the use of electric guitars in country music was refined and a more daring, sophisticated country sound was born, long before the "Nashville Sound" came into existence. Eventually Nashville picked up and improved on the California sound, but the animosity remained for years.

Clifford Gilpin Snyder was born March 1, 1917, in Stockton, California. His parents moved to Burbank nine months later. His father, Herman, who owned both a tree nursery and kennels, also worked in movies. His movie roles led to his joining West Coast country singer Stuart Hamblen's radio show in the 1930's. Because of



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PHOTO COURTESY CLIFFIE STONE

Pioneers of West Coast country in 1943—Wes Tuttle, Cliffie, Roy Rogers, Frank Liddell and Eddie Cletro in photo left. What Cliffie calls the “bare bones cast” of the *Dinner Bell Round-Up* in photo right, taken in 1946-47—Wes Tuttle, Eddie Kirk (“Sonny”), Merle Travis, Cliffie, Texanne Nation, Herman the Hermit (Cliffie’s dad) and Tex Atchison. Two men kneeling were sponsors.

Merle Travis to Capitol and often played bass on the recordings.

Cliffie not only produced hits for Merle Travis, together they created a number of country standards. Cliffie gave him the title, “No Vacancy,” for which Merle wrote the song that became his first hit record. In 1946, Cliffie asked Merle for a song for Tex Williams, whose career at Capitol was faltering. Merle came back with “Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette).” It not only saved Tex’s Capitol contract, it was the label’s first million-seller. Cliffie himself played the memorable walking bass fiddle intro. In fact, the country hits Cliffie produced may well have helped Capitol survive some rocky financial times in the late 40’s.

Cliffie’s own records were novelty songs. By his own admission, he didn’t have much of a singing voice, but the musicianship was strong. His three hit records all came within a year’s time. “Silver Stars, Purple Sage, Eyes of Blue” reached Number Four in the spring of 1947. “Peepin’ Through the Keyhole (Watchin’ Jole Blon)” was a novelty “answer” tune to the Cajun number, “Jole Blon,” that was a huge hit for both Roy Acuff and Cajun fiddler Harry Choates in 1947. In the spring of 1948 “Peepin’” also went to Number Four. That fall his version of the Wiley Walker-Gene Sullivan ballad, “When My Blue Moon Turns to Gold Again,” made it to Number Eleven.

Meanwhile, Cliffie was also establishing himself in radio. In 1946, he began putting together his own radio show at KXLA Radio in Pasadena. He called it the *Dinner Bell Round-Up* and used a small cast of performers, including Travis and Stan Freberg.

Ernest J. Ford, who’d abandoned his attempts to become a singer in order to

work in radio, had been hired by KXLA owner, Loyal King, in 1947 as a staff announcer and host of the morning program *Bar Nothing Ranch Time*. It was here he created his “Pea-Picker” persona. Ernie played records, sang along with them and did comedy. Cliffie, impressed with Ernie’s singing voice, asked him to sing on the *Round-Up* and to perform in skits.

Cliffie wanted Ernie in the cast, but Ernie, concerned about holding onto his announcer’s job and the security that came with it, was reluctant. In the end he joined Cliffie’s cast. In 1948, the show was renamed the *Hometown Jamboree* and moved onto TV. The *Jamboree* launched the careers of West Coast performers Eddie Kirk, Bucky Tibbs and Ferlin Husky. All recorded for Capitol. Kirk had two hits: a version of George Morgan’s hit, “Candy Kisses,” in 1948, and “The Gods Were Angry With Me” in 1949.

Among Cliffie’s cohorts, Ernie’s career was the one that soared. Hit records like “Shot Gun Boogie,” “Mule Train” and “Anticipation Blues” established him. “I’ll Never Be Free,” his 1950 hit with pop singer Kay Starr, was such a huge crossover hit that it alone took his career beyond *Hometown*. As Ernie’s success grew, he was offered better-paying engagements. He didn’t have a manager, so Cliffie was pressed into service. In 1953, he took Ernie to the London Palladium and helped him land his CBS radio show, his 1955 daytime NBC-TV show and his 1956-61 NBC evening variety shows.

When “Sixteen Tons” sent Ernie’s career skyrocketing in 1956, Cliffie was reluctant to give up the *Hometown Jamboree*. Instead, he quit producing records for Capitol—the legendary Ken Nelson replaced him. Old

habits die hard, however, and Cliffie did slip back to the Capitol studios to produce an occasional album for them. Eventually, Cliffie found himself stretched too thin as the pressures of Tennessee Ernie Ford’s career continued to build. Health problems finally forced him to turn Ernie’s management over to second-in-command, Jim Loakes, who manages Ernie today.

The *Hometown Jamboree* ended in the early 1960’s. However, Cliffie had plenty to do managing his song publishing concerns, Snyder Music and American Music/Central Songs, both of which controlled a considerable number of hit songs, including all of Merle Travis’. Both companies were eventually sold to Capitol. Cliffie managed a few clients and in the 70’s went to work managing the country division of ATV Music. He also founded a new record company called Granite Records that yielded minor hits for Molly Bee and Tex Williams.

When ATV was sold to Michael Jackson several years ago, Cliffie was out of a job—but not for long. Old friend Gene Autry hired him to run Gene Autry Music, which also holds a considerable number of country classics in its catalog. It’s still his job today. He also finds time to emcee local shows.

What is amazing about Stone is that, at 73, his gregarious personality, energy, business skills and understanding of audiences as well as artists are unimpaired. His skill at packaging remains unique in the field. In fact, much of what our music is today—in Nashville, California and around the world—can be traced to the vision and genius of Cliffie Stone. —RICH KIENZLE

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