

The Cuts and The Bruises

(The Triumphs and Tragedies of Songplugging)

As I was doing the interviews, I wanted to get some stories that would show the successes and disappointments of songplugging. I asked most of those I interviewed for one or two stories about songs they had gotten cut, and maybe one that was so close it hurt. I've given you a sampling of these stories in this chapter, and you will find them repeated in their respective interviews, along with many more cuts and bruises stories. Overall, it turned out there were more stories on cuts than bruises, and I suppose that might be a testament to why these folks are so successful: They focus on their achievements and not their setbacks. Or it could be that some things are just too painful to remember — I know *exactly* how that feels.

* There are more cuts and bruises stories in the interviews

Jody Williams

Cut: I can remember when I worked for Tree Publishing — this was a little over twenty years ago — I was working with Harlan Howard, Jamie O'Hara and Vince Gill. Back then Vince was not the superstar he is now; he was singing all of our demos. It was just a great era, with writers like Bobby Braddock and Curly Putman — just a great crew of people. It was back in the Buddy Killen, Donna Hilley era of Tree. Jamie and I had become good friends. I was sort of the youngest songplugger over there, and I really gravitated toward Jamie. So, for a while there, he would bring me his songs first. One day he brought me a cassette made from a boom box of a song called "Grandpa, (Tell Me 'Bout The Good Old Days)."

At the time, the Judd's were just red hot! I listened to the song and it was obviously one of those songs that any idiot walking down the street would have known was a hit. If you had any connection to anybody in that camp, you were going to get that song cut. So I said, "Okay, Jamie, I'm going to take this to Brent Maher right now!" I took it to Brent and I think it was about a week later, the Judds recorded it. That really helped me cultivate a relationship with Brent.

It also ended up winning a Grammy for country song of the year, back in 1986. But that's when it's easy. Who's not going to relate to that song, and who better to sing it than the Judds? When I think back, I can remember driving around and finding Brent Maher, and I even remember what his office looked like when I played it for him. You just don't forget stuff like that.

Scott Hendricks

Cut: *There is a song on the first album with Alan Jackson that we weren't supposed to cut. We were only approved to cut fourteen songs. Well, we had cut all fourteen, and there was still fifteen minutes left on the tracking session. But there was one more song that both Keith Stegall and I really liked. It just wasn't approved by the label. But we had fifteen minutes, so we thought, why not? And we cut it. The next day, Tim DuBois calls and asks me, "How did it go?" I said, it went great! Then he asked, "Which song do you think is the hit?" And I told him the title of the fifteenth song. He was just livid! "You weren't even supposed to cut that song! It wasn't on our approved list." And I said, we cut all fourteen on the list, and we had time, so we cut this one as well. Your question was what song I think is the hit. And my answer to you was... that fifteenth song.*

Believe it or not, while he was on the phone he told me, "Not only is that song not a hit, it's not even going to make the record!" We finished all fifteen songs and turned them in to the label, and to Tim's credit — and I admire him greatly for this — he let everybody in the office listen to every song — all fifteen.

And pretty much, everybody in the office liked that fifteenth song best. Still, he didn't want it as the first single. So Alan came out with "Blue Blooded Woman" as his first single. But when it came time for the second single, again to Tim's credit, he said, "Okay, maybe I'm the only guy that's missing this. Everybody seems to like this other song, so I'm going to go with it." And that's the song that broke Alan Jackson as an artist. It was a song called "Here In The Real World." That really taught me a lesson. Sometimes even the best ears in the business don't hear it initially. Since this happened, the story has been reversed for me, when I was in Tim's shoes. I have so much respect for Tim because of that. We've all had those similar situations, but it takes a big person to go, "You know what? I could be wrong about this." I admire him for doing that, and I learned a valuable lesson that helped me later on.

Dan Hodges

Bruise: *Like any songplugger, I've had songs that have been on hold for a long time that end up getting dropped. But back in '98 or '99 when I worked at Fame, I had a hold on a song I pitched to Deana Carter. It was written by one of our big writers at the time, and it just so happened that his contract was up for renewal—he was re-negotiating. Well, Deana had this song on hold and they were planning on cutting it — her and [producer] Chris Farren. But one day I got a call from Missi Gallimore and she wanted the song for Faith Hill.*

At the time, Deana was just as popular as Faith. With the success of Deana's first record, they were pretty much at the same level career-wise. Missi and Byron Gallimore wanted to play the song for Faith, and here's the thing: Deana wasn't cutting for another month, and Faith was cutting like the next week. So Missi said, "We'll play this song for Faith tomorrow. We love this song. Can we have it?" I told her, "Well, Deana has it on hold and she's supposed to cut it next month. But let me call and find out if they still want the song." So I called Deana's manager, and he said he'd call Deana and find out. So he called her and she said, "Oh yes, I'm

cutting the song. Actually, we're doing a pre-production guitar-vocal on it tomorrow." He even waited to call me back until after they did the guitar vocal, and told me everyone just loved it. He said, "Deana's planning on cutting the song; don't let Faith have it!" So I had to call Missi and say, "Sorry, Deana wants it." In my defense, I want to point out that Missi never promised to cut it. She just said they loved it and wanted to play it for Faith. There was no guarantee Faith would actually cut it. As you probably guessed, Faith went in and finished her record, and then a month later Deana dropped the song. It was one of those heartbreak things, and the writer was absolutely distraught over it. What made matters worse is I had told him the whole story as it was going along. He thought that I should have given it to Missi and Byron, and if Faith actually did cut it, clean everything up at the end. Like, "Sorry Deana. Faith got to it before you." But I really thought I had handled it the right way. In retrospect, I probably should have given it to Faith and let whoever cut it first have the song. The one thing I learned from that is you can't pass up a cut. In this business, a hold doesn't guarantee a cut. A song can be on hold for a year, only to be unceremoniously dropped. So if somebody says they'll cut the song, let 'em cut it!

Darrell Franklin

Bruise: *Everybody misses stuff, for whatever reason. We had a heart breaker when we were working on a Trace Adkins album. I was pitched a great song, and I put it on hold for Trace. I played it for Dann, and at the time, it just really wasn't what we were looking for — so we moved on. About a month later, I was told by the songpluggers that the song had been written with Trace in mind. It was called "Ain't Nothing About You," and it later went on to be a big hit for Brooks & Dunn. The reason it was such a bruise is, we had moved on with Trace's album, and when Brooks & Dunn released that song as a single, it was a hit, flying up the charts. And by then, we had refocused the direction on Trace, and I remember Dann saying, "What we need is that song; we need another "Ain't Nothing About You." Dann said, "Call up the publishers and tell them to pitch us songs like that one." So I remember calling Pat Higdon and saying, hey, just FYI; we're needing a song like, "Ain't Nothing About You." I think Pat conversed with the pluggers over there, and they came back to me and said, "Well, actually, you were the first one to hear that song." And of course, they reminded me of what had happened. You know, sometimes you just forget when you've heard something — that happens. But that was one particular case where Dann and I both had heard it, and passed on it. And then when we heard it on the radio, it matched up perfectly with the new direction we're going with Trace. So that was our bruise. [laughs]*

Cliff Audretch III

Cut: *One that was really special was a song called “Help Somebody.” It was the first time that I ever had a song cut that was a single, and being included in the process was awesome! My friend Clay Bradley put it on hold for Van Zant. Mark Wright was producing, and they just kept me in the loop on what was going on with the song, like who had heard the song and stuff like that. They were all excited about it. They told me everything about the tracking session, how the mixes were coming along, all of which was very exciting. They even told me about the internal debates on what should be the first single for this record, because it was kind of a question mark. These guys are serious rockers, and they were putting together a country duo project. Given that, what kind of song do you come out with? I know Clay fought really hard for “Help Somebody” to be the first single. When they did release it as the first single, it was awesome! And then for it to have the success and impact that it did — unbelievable!*

It’s just neat to see stuff like that: to take it from the very beginning, and see it to the finish line. Mark (Wright) and Clay (Bradley), and everyone at Sony, including John Grady, let us be a part of it. They made us feel like we were part of the family, and they didn’t have to do that. Johnny and Donnie were so gracious. I took the writers to meet them at one of their gigs. One was Jeffrey Steele, who they already knew, but the other guy was Kip Raines. They were just so fantastic with them. That’s just one of those songs that not only was it a hit, and financially successful, but it also has a lyric that really means something. It makes a difference and it really touches people. When I went to see them in concert and heard them play it live, it was even more amazing! They were opening for Gretchen Wilson; so there was an arena full of people, singing every word of that song. And in my mind, I immediately went back to when I first heard the work tape.

Steve Seskin

Bruise: *One I remember most, happened when I was playing in Sundance — not Sun Valley. You know, Robert Redford’s place. He has a big resort there, and for several summers now, the Bluebird Cafe has done a series of shows where they bring in hit writers. Kind of like “The Bluebird at Sundance.” They bring three or four writers for the week, and you perform every night at this club. It’s a lot of fun, and a bit of a vacation. Well, one night somebody sends a note up to the stage that says, “Richie McDonald from Lonestar is in the audience; would you like to have him come up and do a song?” We all said, “Sure, that would be great!” He came up and sang “I’m Already There” and a couple of other songs. Then after the night was over he came up to Allen Shamblin and I and said, “What are you guys doing tomorrow morning?” We said, “Well, we’re just hanging around.” He says, “We’re playing tomorrow night in Salt Lake City, but we don’t have a sound check till 2:30; would you want to write tomorrow morning?” We said, “Sure!” Richie tells us, “We’re cutting in about two weeks; let’s try to write something for the project.” So we get together around 9:30 in the morning and go till about 1:30, and we write this cool song! We liked it and Richie liked it, so we did a little work tape, and he takes off. Then we get a call from him on our cell phone later that day about how much he*

loves the song. We're saying, "Great!" Then we get another call from him saying, "Hey, I played it for the band and they're just digging it! I can't wait to get back to Nashville and play it for the label and Dann Huff!" So we're like, "All right!" About a week later he called again and said, "I played it for A&R and they really dig it, and I played for Dann yesterday and he loves it!" So Allen and I were thinking, "Okay, this is just fabulous!" Then Richie calls up about a week later and says, "Hey guys, we cut it today, listen to this!" He plays us a little bit of it over the cell phone, and we're doing what all songwriters would do in that situation — thinking about buying a new car! Because, you know, it's too good to be true! Then about two weeks later we hear that he turned in the record, which had twelve or thirteen songs on it, and Joe Galante decided that two of them had to go. Guess whose song made the "two must go" list? So we never made the record. We went from high and mighty to down and out.

Chapter Wrap-up

I mentioned earlier that a songplugger meets with rejection ninety-nine percent of the time, but that one percent is worth waiting for. The "Cuts" in this chapter give you a sense of how incredible it must have been for these individuals to see these songs go from that moment of creation to being cut and released on a record.

And even though the "Bruise" stories happened to someone else, most of us in this business can all feel their pain. I think every songplugger can easily identify and empathize with the disappointment of being so close, only to see it slip through your hands. I hope these stories and the one's told in the interviews will encourage you to keep going, and let you know that in your disappointments, you are *definitely* not alone.

Enjoy the rest of the interviews in their entirety. I hope you find them as inspiring as I did. And it is my sincere wish that in every part of your life, you have more triumphs than tragedies.