

SHOW & TELL

Marty Stuart is busier than he's ever been and loving it.

Story By LORIE HOLLABAUGH

Photos By CHRIS HOLLO

Musician and *Late Show With David Letterman* sidekick Paul Shaffer (far left) sits in with Marty and The Fabulous Superlatives.



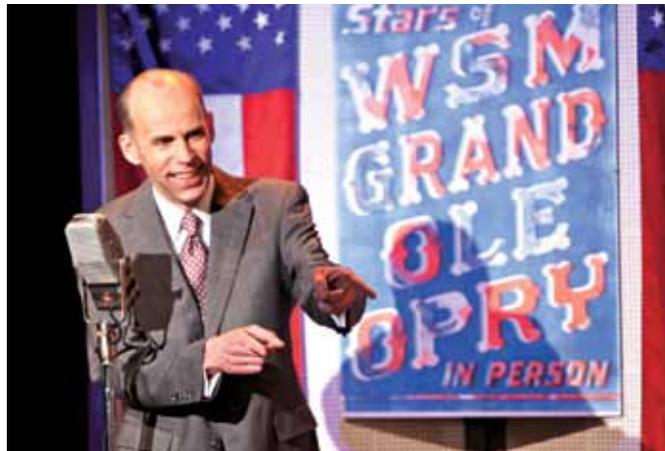
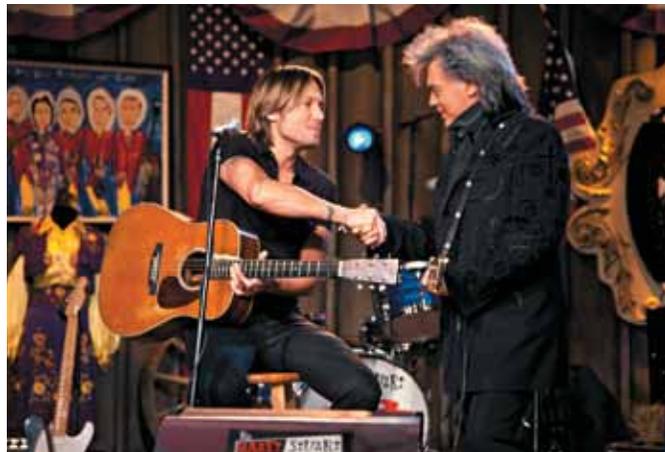
Marty Stuart has a habit of calling people around him “cuz,” as if they were one of his long-lost cousins or various relatives. But with him, it’s more than the lingo of his hip, retro world. He treats the people close to him as if they were his cousins, sisters or brothers and, seemingly, loves them just as much.

Take Bob Wootton, once Johnny Cash’s guitar player, who on this particular day is sitting in the audi-

ence at the taping of Marty’s television show, which airs on RFD-TV. It’s been 25 years since Marty played with Johnny’s band, but as he greets the audience and prepares to tape an episode featuring Keith Urban, he quickly acknowledges Bob in the audience so the crowd will know that hillbilly royalty is in their midst. Some artists might do that out of courtesy, or for the sake of appearances, but how many would pull Bob out of the crowd after the taping to join the cast and Keith for pictures and the show promo? Welcome to

the world of Marty Stuart.

This incarnation of his world, as host of his own half-hour TV show, began over two years ago, when he decided country needed a family program in the vein of vintage shows such as *The Wilburn Brothers Show* and the old Al Gannaway productions of the 1950s, which featured artists such as Minnie Pearl and The Louvin Brothers. But it also reaches back even deeper to Marty’s childhood and those Saturday afternoons spent watching priceless musical moments on television with his father.



Marty and Paul Shaffer share a musical moment.

(Clockwise from above left) Marty welcomes Keith Urban to *The Marty Stuart Show*; bluegrass legend Curly Seckler sits in; Marty greets an audience member; Marty jams while Paul Shaffer (far right) looks on; Paul joins the fun; show announcer Eddie Stubbs.

MARTY STUART CONTINUED

“Back when I was a kid in Mississippi, Saturday afternoons was my time with my dad,” says Marty. “He was a factory worker, and on Saturdays we could hang out together and watch TV. And that was our quality time. We both shared a deep love of country music, so Flatt & Scruggs, and Porter’s show, the Wilburn Brothers, the old Johnny Cash show—we really loved watching those, and they touched me permanently. They really put a deep, abiding love for country music in my heart, so when it came time to

do this show I thought, ‘Well, let’s see if we can’t touch on those kind of shows.’” The show also gave Marty a platform to showcase the traditional country that radio won’t give voice to anymore, a freedom he and his amazing band, The Fabulous Superlatives, revel in each week as they continually broaden the musical horizons of the show. “From the get-go I didn’t have anybody telling me I could or couldn’t do anything,” explains Marty. “And we talked about it, and the bottom line was it’s either interesting or

it’s not, and it either entertains or it don’t. And so that opened the door . . . it’s never been about ‘Here’s my latest record,’ ‘cause 20 years from now when this show is still running, that won’t matter anymore. So it’s about timeless matters as best we can do, about real talent, whether it’s a kid who can play the fiddle out there that nobody knows about, or an old country legend that nobody will give a voice to anymore. And the beauty of it is it’s a true stage for traditional country music and I love it.”

“The most outlaw and the most renegade thing you can do in Nashville is play country music.”

And while many modern outlets are trying to move country as far away from hay bales and cornfields as possible, in true rebel fashion, Marty did just the opposite with his show. The set is as colorful and sparkling as one of Marty’s hand-sewn rhinestone jackets, with huge neon daisies, gleaming Manuel and Nudie jackets and colorful neckerchiefs from Marty’s personal collection, and even wagon wheels adorning practically every corner. “What’s seen on GAC and CMT—that’s exactly what needs to be seen on those networks. But to balance it out, somebody needed to go down to the end of the dirt road. You know, the most outlaw and the most renegade thing you can do in Nashville is play country music . . . play hard-core country music unapologetically. And we did the first show three seasons ago, and the set was so pretty and clean, and I told somebody, I said, ‘Get me some hay bales! Get me some rhinestones! We’re gonna junk it up! Make it a barn!’” admits Marty with a laugh.

The show quickly became the network’s top-rated program, and the guest list each season runs the gamut, with artists such as Loretta

Lynn, Keith Urban, Travis Tritt, Willie Nelson and Paul Shaffer adding their names to a waiting list to be part of the fun and step inside Marty’s world for a bit of time. Show regulars include his backing band, The Fabulous Superlatives, Leroy Troy, Marty’s wife, Connie Smith, and host Eddie Stubbs.

Guests obviously enjoy the loose and fun creative vibe of the show, as is evident on this day, when Keith performs a Waylon Jennings tune with Marty and The Fabulous Superlatives, laying into a blistering solo on a guitar once owned by Waylon during a take on “I’ve Always Been Crazy.” Marty and the band are grinning from ear to ear by song’s end, and it’s apparent that they all have a great time together and are as tight as it gets. “They are the best band in this town or anybody’s town,” brags Marty, “and not just as musicians, mainly as men. They’re statesmen. I see a lot of stars created in this town, a lot of stars invented and a lot of hype around a lot of people, but at the end of the day, being a statesman is what it’s about. And making sure the legacy of the music and the personal legacy is intact. We are a family, and it’s an honor to travel with those men.”

MARTY STUART CONTINUED

Marty deliberately kept the show in a fast-paced, half-hour format like those old shows to keep things moving. “We wanted a fast-moving show revolving around a cast of characters, and there’s so much talent on this show that if we happen to have a week where nobody can come be a special guest it don’t matter—we just keep going. And so we just pull the trigger on it and we start smiling, and we get here smiling and we leave smiling, and I watch it and I smile.”

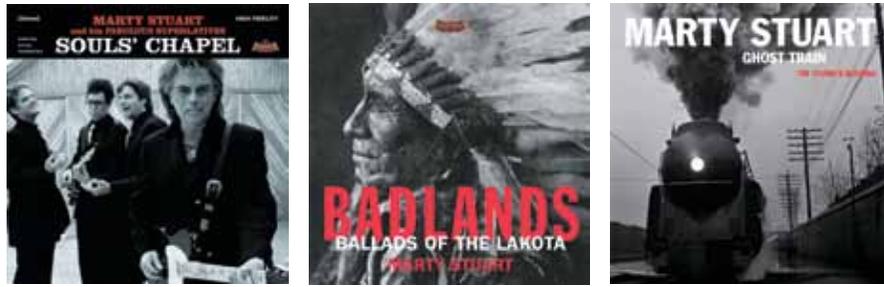
The series not only gave Marty another place to play his music, it also ended up inspiring his latest album, *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions*. The collection has received rave reviews and garnered two Grammy noms for the singer, who found himself at a crossroads a decade ago when radio would no longer play his music and he was forced to find another path.

“We just lit out into the world and went where anybody would have us,” Marty explains. “I told my agent to put us as far back in the woods as you can where nobody cares . . . we just want to play for people and we’re gonna play

our way out of the woods and see where we go. And we found ourselves as kind of cultural missionaries in a sense, in a position of being a voice sometimes for people who were hurting. The Lakota people in the Badlands . . . that’s the poorest county in the United States—we needed to make a record [*Badlands: Ballads of the Lakota*]. And the Mississippi Delta’s not exactly overflowing with money, it’s a hard-pressed area, so that’s why my bluegrass CD *Souls’ Chapel* came about. And so we played our way back toward the light, toward the city limit sign again from the backroads of America, and RFD gave me a place to

play country music once again. Country radio wasn’t doing it anymore, and that was OK—things had changed, the Opry was always there, but all of a sudden I had a place to play what was the deepest in my heart. And we had an audience all of a sudden. And a place to write traditional country songs and bring ‘em to a TV camera and send ‘em out to people. And *Ghost Train* was kind of a result of that.”

One of the Grammy-nominated pieces on the album, “Hummingbyrd,” is doubly special to Marty, since it is a tribute to former Byrds guitarist Clarence White. The tune features



(Above) Marty’s albums *Souls’ Chapel*, *Badlands: Ballads of the Lakota* and *Ghost Train: The Studio B Sessions* are the result of his role as a cultural missionary; (below) *The Marty Stuart Show*, which has begun its third season on cable/satellite channel RFD-TV, is a traditional country fan’s dream.



MARTY (IN MS) BY JOE HARDWICK; MARTY & CONNIE BY AARON CRISLER/THE LUDY NELSON GROUP

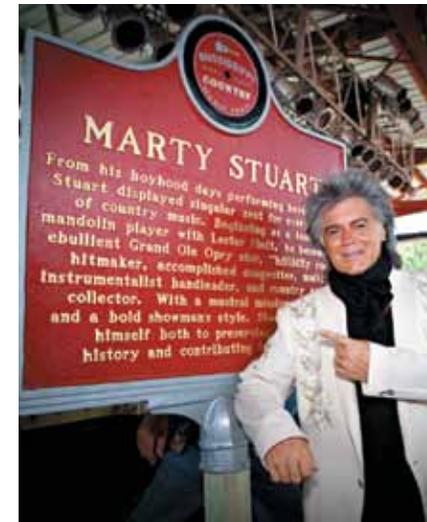
Clarence’s actual guitar on the song. “There’s a lot of weight and responsibility that comes with that guitar, because Clarence was such a master musician. I’ve never felt like I had come up with my recital piece for that guitar, and ‘Hummingbyrd’ came along and his old bandmate, Gene Parsons of The Byrds, we played in Napa and I asked Gene if he would come to our concert. I played him “Hummingbyrd” before I played it for anybody else. Gene gave me thumbs up on it, so that gave me the confidence to go forward with it.”

Clarence’s Telecaster is just one of the many unique pieces Marty possesses in his music collection, which has been on loan to the Country Music Hall of Fame, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and even the Louvre in Paris. The collection includes 20,000 pieces of memorabilia, and has been a labor of love for Marty for decades.

“It really started when I found Patsy Cline’s makeup case for \$75 in a thrift shop,” he explains. “That hit me that somebody needs to do something. On a personal basis it gave me a mission. When I started making more than two checks in a row I didn’t really care much about stocks and bonds, but I did understand buying Hank Williams’ lyrics or his boots or his suit. It was like buying American culture to me. And preserving a piece of history and a piece of our country heritage.”

A beloved piece of Marty’s collection is the guitar owned by R&B/gospel great Pops Staples given to him by his daughters. A mentor and hero to Marty, Pops recently received a marker on the Mississippi Blues Trail, a trail in the state formed to recognize its rich diverse musical talent. (Marty was awarded his own marker along a similar trail, the Mississippi Country Music Trail, last July.) The state’s impressive musical heritage will actually be highlighted in an upcoming documentary on his life, *Marty Stuart in Philadelphia, Mississippi*, due out later this year. He is proud to hail from an area that has produced such a wealth of cultural gifts.

“The thing about Mississippi when it comes to creativity is [that] about all you have to do is turn a camera on down there and aim it in any direction, and there’s something to hear or see,” he says.



(Above) Marty was honored with a marker on the Mississippi Country Music Trail in 2010; (below) Marty celebrates his 50th birthday with wife Connie Smith at the Ernest Tubbs Record Shops Midnite Jamboree in 2008.



“When I get to heaven one of the things I’m gonna ask God is, ‘How come Mississippi?’ ‘cause it is just staggering what has come from there and what continues to come from down there. When it comes to creativity, it’s unparalleled.”

Marty also recently wrapped up his first UK tour in a decade, and is looking forward to his next project—a new album by wife Connie Smith. It will be her first in 16 years, and he is tickled he was able to lure her back into the studio.

“We carried her back to Studio B, and it was good,” he says. “We wrote some of the songs, and she recorded her 69th Dallas Frazier song and a couple of traditional things. We put Connie back in front of the microphone and made a brilliant record on her. I’m a career-driven maniac and I love it, and she loves it, too, but she’s a mama

and a wife, and that’s her priorities. And singing, when she finally gets around to it, boy, she’s the best at it, but her getting around to it is on her own timetable. It was worth the wait, ‘cause it’s a mighty big piece of work.”

Though his own career may look vastly different from his hit-heavy period in the ‘90s, Marty is excited about how the musical landscape of his life currently looks. “It was great, and I had a big time. But it’s not about the past, it’s about bringing the whole story forward, the entire family of country music, and taking it anywhere. I heard someone say that Hank Williams’ songs could go where he couldn’t when he was here, and that’s how I feel about country music. It’s American culture, it’s an art form, it is highly respected, it is integrity-based music, and a thousand years from now it will still be as relevant as it is today.

“My success back then afforded me some cowboy clothes and a wider audience than I had had at the time, and I never look at that as the heyday years, just simply a chapter and phase that I’m grateful for,” he continues. “But it’s a lot more interesting in my life right now than it ever has been. Now is the fun part. I used to get sick at my stomach when Monday mornings would roll around because I knew I was going to be judged by how many [new radio stations] my record [was on] and by a group of consultants that probably had never seen me or heard me before telling somebody that they had never seen or heard before that they should or should not play my record. It made me feel worthless sometimes. I thought, ‘Bullsh—. There is another way to do this. I know what God put in me and around me and I think I will stand on that rather than [on] what some guy in Seattle says about my record.’ Country radio was wonderful—I love country radio, I listen to it, there will come a day I’ll be back on it one way or the other, no doubt about it. But right now, this is what we’re doing. It’s about books, and museum exhibits, and preserving a culture, and a TV show, and writing songs, and the sky’s the limit! To squander all that or throw all that away just to do one other thing on Music Row, I’ve been there, and I’m having more fun than anybody else!” **CW**