

America's Picker

STORY BY JOSEPH HUDAK | PHOTOS BY CHRIS HOLLO

Marty Stuart has made it his life's work to collect country's artifacts.

In a nondescript strip mall just down the road from a Sonic Drive-In in Hendersonville, Tenn., sits a warehouse of country music memorabilia that would make the guys from *American Pickers* drool.

The artifacts are often decades old and widely varied. Jimmy Rodgers' satchel. Patsy Cline's makeup kit. Roy Rogers' pistols. Even Hank Williams' death certificate.

And a little black box labeled: "Things given to me by Johnny Cash."

The "me" in question is Marty Stuart, the keeper of this treasure trove who protects it with all the zeal and passion of a knight charged with protecting the Holy Grail. For Marty, preserving country music's history has become his life's mission.

"Everything was changing in country music—the look, the sound—and this stuff was just a throwaway," says Marty, gesturing toward a rack of sequined stage clothes and suits from the likes of Hank and Porter Wagoner. "We were disregarding it. It was going to the edge of town and washing away. I went, 'Whoa. These are the people who raised me.' You can't do that. I don't have to do that. We shouldn't

breach the stories. It should be one [continuous story of country music] from The Carter Family and Jimmy Rodgers to whoever is the hot shot of the moment.

"Everything Miranda Lambert or Blake or Taylor is doing right now, that's the story, from then till now."

Marty's archives—which presently take up three garage-like storage lockers, including one with memorabilia from his own career—began to take shape back in the early 1980s when he stumbled across a rare find in a dusty antique store.

"There was a little shop on 8th Avenue [in Nashville] in a little strip of antique malls, and I picked up [a leather-bound box] and went, 'That's pretty cool,'" recalls the Philadelphia, Miss., native. Upon closer inspection, he noticed a name stamped on the lid—that of Patsy Cline.

"It had her address inside too, Hillhurst in Madison, Tennessee. I put a blanket over it, and I went and called her husband, Charlie Dick, and said, 'Where'd you guys live in Madison?' And he said, 'Oh hell, I think it was Hillcrest or something.' I said, 'Thank you,' Marty says dramatically. "I went to the front desk, asked the lady how much, she said, 'You can have it for \$75,' and I went, 'Uh, ok.'"

The Man in Plaid: Marty in his warehouse, surrounded by memorabilia from artists like Patsy Cline and Johnny Cash.



MTV: MARTY TELEVISION

WITH HIS OWN VARIETY SHOW, THE ENTERTAINER BRINGS TWANG TO TV.

IF YOU HAVEN'T YET TUNED IN to *The Marty Stuart Show* (airing Saturdays at 8 p.m. ET on RFD-TV), you're missing out on one of the most colorful presentations of country to ever be on the small screen. And we do mean colorful: the set, with its hay bales, wagon wheels and artifacts from Marty's collection, is a Technicolor dream of sequins and spangles. Of course, the music is pretty fine, too.

"[The show] has become the

theater for a lot of the things I love and believe in," Marty says. "It's the old legends, but at the same time it gives voice to the young people like Brandy Clark and Old Crow Medicine Show, people who play this stuff as good as it's ever been played." Upcoming episodes feature such stars as Merle Haggard, Sheryl Crow and Marty's wife, Connie Smith, who appears in every show.

Raised on the country variety programs of Porter Wagoner, Flatt & Scruggs and Johnny Cash, Marty sought to re-create that magic.

"I said, 'Let's go back to the definition of the Grand Ole Opry, a good-natured frolic and riot on Saturday night,'" he says. "And let's fill it up with fearless entertainment, going, 'We know we look square, but we know what we're doing.'"

They certainly do.

HERE'S THE UPCOMING GUEST SCHEDULE:

APRIL 20 Gene Watson	JUNE 1 The Chuck Wagon Gang
APRIL 27 Stonewall Jackson	JUNE 8 Connie Smith
MAY 4 Iris Dement	JUNE 15 Corb Lund
MAY 11 Tommy Emmanuel	JUNE 22 John Conlee
MAY 18 Johnny Rivers	JUNE 29 Merle Haggard
MAY 25 Sheryl Crow	



(Clockwise, from right) A Hank Sr. cutout; racks of sequins; Patsy's makeup kit; boots from Johnny Cash, George Jones, Hank Snow and others; Marty's "Cash box"; the vinyl room (note the Connie Smith LP on the table)

MARTY STUART CONTINUED

And in the process he accumulated his first-ever piece of American music history.

But Marty doesn't hoard his country gold. All of his artifacts are freely available to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum and the Grand Ole Opry Museum. "The Hall of Fame knows that if I have it and they need it, all they have to do is call," he says. "This is good neighbor stuff. It needs to be shared and studied upon."

Marty also uses some of the pieces as set dressing for his variety show, *The Marty Stuart Show*, airing weekly on RFD-TV (see sidebar).

"I thought I'd utilize these things, bring them back to life, let people enjoy them," he says, adding that the collection has also toured the world as an exhibit. "It's amazing the power when people see it. I've watched them, as a fly on the wall, stand in front of Patsy Cline's dress that her mama made her and cry. Or stand in front of Johnny Cash's lyrics to 'Folsom Prison Blues' or 'Man in Black' and have a moment. There is a power in these artifacts and these people feel connected."

The Man in Black—Marty's onetime father-in-law when Marty was married to

Cindy Cash, as well as his boss when he played in Johnny's band—looms large in the collection. Along with that matter-of-factly labeled "Cash box," there are also framed photos, a shelf of Johnny's ornately detailed high boots, and the guitar that the country icon played on *The Fabulous Johnny Cash*, which included classics like "Don't Take Your Guns to Town" and "I Still Miss Someone."

In fact, it was as a member of Johnny's band, when Marty truly realized the cultural and historical importance of collecting.

"We went to London and I went to the first Hard Rock Café and I saw The Beatles, The Stones, Otis Redding, The Who, and all their stuff on the wall. And in my mind, I thought, it's just as important if that was Porter Wagoner, Hank Williams and George Jones and so on [up there]," Marty says. "When I came back to America, I made it a mission. It became my whole focus: Get all of the country music artifacts that I possibly can and preserve them, and lock them down. Because they're getting away fast."

But make no mistake, Marty isn't putting his own guitars in mothballs. The neo-



traditionalist, who released the rollicking *Nashville, Vol. 1: Tear the Woodpile Down* last year, has two albums in the works and is readying for his annual Late Night Jam at the Ryman Auditorium on June 5.

Still, he's keenly aware of where he fits in today's country-scape.

"We had just an almost unstoppable commercial run for about 15 years. One day I woke up and radio had started cooling on my songs, and I chased for five minutes, and I was miserable," he says of his glory days. "I thought there is something more to be done here. I went back home to Mississippi and I really prayed about it. I thought, 'You left home when you were

12 years old, and you haven't let up since. Time out. What are you going to do with the back half of your life?"

Marty decided he'd pursue his one true love: traditional country music.

"I love it more than any other form of country music. The mission for me and [my band] the Superlatives for the past 12 years has been to [fit traditional country] alongside classical, jazz, ballet, whatever, in the pantheon of the American arts. And it's finally working," explains Marty.

It's his hope that through preserving not only the artifacts of country's past, but also the music itself, that he'll inspire a whole new crop of artists.

"I want to get the music into the hearts and hands of young people that are coming through saying, 'I want to do that, but they're telling me I have to be like so and so on the radio.' I say, 'We already got one of those. Be who you are, at any cost,'" concludes Marty, a walking and talking encyclopedia of country knowledge.

"I wouldn't trade what's going on in my life these days for what happened in the '90s, when my records were hitting, for any amount of money. Because this is the real stuff." **CW**

MARTY & MERLE BY BECKY HIRSCH/IMPALA CREATIVE; JOHNNY CASH BOX BY JOSEPH HUDAČ