



Delbert McClinton: *One of the Fortunate Few*

Diana Finlay Hendricks

Still the pleasure was worth the pain
Of everything she put me through
And I consider myself one of the fortunate few.¹

Delbert McClinton, award-winning singer, songwriter, musician, and bandleader, is, as described in his song, “One of the Fortunate Few.” Born in Lubbock and raised in Fort Worth, the Texas artist has risen to international acclaim, playing professionally for most of the past six decades. He has had a backstage pass to the evolution of Texas and American music, and most importantly, has played a significant role in helping shape that music. However, a major part of McClinton’s legacy, which often goes unrecognized, is the fact that he has always ignored racial and ethnic cultural boundaries and blended together a wide range of musical styles into his own distinct sound.

In many ways, Delbert McClinton’s career reflects the rather unique musical history of his home state. Situated at the geographical and cultural crossroads of Latin America, the Deep South, the American West, and the Great Plains, Texas has long been a confluence zone for a remarkably diverse array of ethnic groups who settled in the area over the past 500 years, interacting in ways that have left a distinct cultural imprint on the Lone Star State. Even at a young age, McClinton was absorbing the broad array of musical influences found throughout the Southwest and starting to combine them in innovative ways that allowed him to not only develop his own style, but also to break down many of the musical, racial, and cultural barriers that existed around him at the time.

The evolution of Texas music reflects the long, complex, and, at times, tumultuous history of the American Southwest. Dozens of different Native American groups, each with its own musical traditions, had lived in the region for thousands of years before the first Europeans (Spaniards) began establishing permanent settlements in the 1500s. By the early 1800s, a variety of other ethnic groups were moving into the area, including Anglos, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, French, Germans, Poles, Czechs, and African Americans, all of whom contributed their musical influences to the larger cultural landscape of the Southwest.

Often these immigrant communities kept mostly to themselves in order to preserve their own traditions and culture. In other cases, certain ethnic groups, especially African Americans and Mexican Americans, were forcibly segregated from white European settlers and discriminated against in a number of ways. Despite the legal, social, and political divides separating different groups of Texans throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, music often transcended these artificially imposed barriers, as musicians, whether consciously or unconsciously, appropriated the musical traditions of others.

Texas music is filled with examples of this type of “cultural cross-pollination,” in which musicians from various ethnic and racial backgrounds borrowed freely from each other. Scott Joplin, the so-called “Father of Ragtime,” was born the son of a former slave near Linden, Texas, in 1868. Joplin combined African American influences with American marching band music and European classical piano training to help create “ragtime,” which laid the foundation for the emergence of jazz in the early twentieth century. By the 1920s, Texas-Mexican musicians

had incorporated the accordion and the polka dance step (both brought to the region by Czech and German immigrants) into a popular style known as *conjunto*, which can still be heard throughout Texas today. During the 1930s and 1940s, Bob Wills and other white musicians in the Southwest were combining blues, jazz, swing, mariachi, and other styles with fiddle hoedowns to create “Texas Swing,” now known as “Western Swing.”²

Those who chronicle Texas music have long recognized this hybridization of diverse musical traditions throughout the American Southwest. Author Joe Nick Patoski describes

groups to demand greater legal, political, and economic equality. President Truman’s successful push to desegregate the U.S. military in 1948 also served as an important catalyst in helping ignite the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.⁵

In addition to these and other changes taking place in American society during the post-World War II period, an emerging “youth culture,” fueled in part by a new sound that came to be called rock and roll, helped inspire a younger generation of Americans to reject the racist and segregationist attitudes of the past. Many of these post-war “baby boomers” were eager to create a new social identity that openly mixed

Music has been instrumental in bridging divides among different ethnic and racial groups.

some of the most prominent ethnic groups found in the Lone Star State, each of which has contributed significantly to the region’s musical culture:

It’s tri-ethnic, based on the Big Three heritages—African, Mexican, and Anglo-American. Say it’s organic or independent or not made in the traditional business center. It is contrarian and individualistic, and it welds a lot of different things together at odd angles to make a cohesive sound. It’s stealing from the Germans and the Mexicans. A lot of people say it’s crazy. And some people don’t like it. But it works here. And it is always evolving. No state has the kind of region with the distinctive sounds we have in Texas. It’s Texas Music.³

In his book, *Segregating Sound*, historian Karl Hagstrom Miller notes that although scholars rarely include it in their studies on racial segregation in the United States, music (along with musicians and music business professionals) has played a vital role in defining and dictating the boundaries of segregation. At the same time, Miller also points out that music has been instrumental in bridging divides among different ethnic and racial groups, thereby helping to eventually undermine racist attitudes and segregationist policies.⁴

For many Americans, long-held attitudes about segregation began to change during the 1940s and 1950s, in part because World War II exposed millions of citizens from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to each other’s cultures and traditions and emboldened African Americans and other marginalized

ethnic and racial cultural traditions. Music was at the forefront of forging this new “collective identity” among American youth of this era. Journalist Mark Kurlansky argues, “There has never been an American generation that so identified with its music, regarded it as its own, the way the Americans who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s did.”⁶

Delbert McClinton came of age during this post-World War II period of social upheaval and the redefining of American youth culture. Although he welcomed the new, more open attitudes regarding the mingling of ethnic and racial cultures, as many others of his generation did, he was born and raised in a southern state that was still racially segregated by law and by custom. Despite this, McClinton defied prevailing segregationist attitudes and policies of his time and helped bring together diverse musicians, fans, and musical genres, in effect helping to “desegregate” the state’s music scene. He makes it clear, however, that race relations were the last thing on his mind at the time. Instead, he was focused primarily on developing a unique sound and performing style that have carried him through more than sixty years on stage.⁷

McClinton’s determination to forge his own distinct sound and achieve success in the music business has certainly paid off. In addition to building a worldwide following, he has won two Grammys and earned numerous accolades from fellow musicians and others throughout the music industry. However, as historian Gary Hartman mentions in *The History of Texas Music*, more important than awards and record sales is the fact that “McClinton helped pave the way for other successful white blues and R&B performers, most notably fellow Texans Jimmie Vaughan and Stevie Ray Vaughan.”⁸

“I’ve Got Dreams to Remember”: The Early Years

Delbert McClinton was born on November 4, 1940, in Lubbock, Texas, to Herman and Vivian Dyer McClinton. Like countless other West Texas musicians, McClinton grew up absorbing the diverse musical genres that filled the airwaves throughout the region. However, McClinton’s musical influences also drew from well outside of his immediate West Texas environment. One of his earliest memories is traveling by train to Alexandria, Louisiana, to visit his father, who had been injured in an Army boot camp and was recovering in a nearby military hospital. While in East Texas and Louisiana, the young Delbert was exposed to a variety of musical styles, including Cajun, country, and songs about the war. After the family returned to Lubbock, and his parents became avid square dancers, McClinton’s musical horizons continued to expand. “I was too little to be left alone and too old to play with the little kids,” he shrugs. “So, I went to square dances. In fact, the first song I ever sang on stage was a square dance call. I think I got hooked on performing for people that day.”⁹

Historians, musicologists, and music fans have long debated how and why West Texas, a largely barren and sparsely populated area, has produced such a large number of influential musicians.¹⁰ Bob Wills, Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Vikki Carr, Waylon Jennings, Tanya Tucker, Joe Ely, Jimmie

Club and we kids would play in the cotton fields next to the parking lot, throwing clods at each other and such. Kids weren’t allowed to go inside, so we’d hang in the windows at the Cotton Club and listen to the music and watch the band, intrigued by the fiddler, the trumpet, and the drummer. That sound really made an impression on me. And you could hear Bob Wills everywhere. The drug store had speakers right over the door and they always played Bob Wills music out onto the sidewalks. The radio stations were on all the time, and we could just hear music everywhere. I don’t know. There’s nothing else to do out there. You either go crazy or play music in Lubbock. There just wasn’t a hell of a lot to do.¹²

McClinton likes to talk about his musical influences. “I listened to old 1940s country and pop, Bob Wills, Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, anything by anybody who did Johnny Mercer songs. And there was always conjunto (a lively, dance-oriented sub-genre of Texas-Mexican music that incorporates accordion and polka beats) around. That has always been a part of Texas music with those popping horns and hot rhythm sections. In 1944, I was four years old. I remember seeing people everywhere in uniform. All the talk was war news. It was everywhere. It was national. It made us all part of something

McClinton helped pave the way for other successful white blues and R&B performers, most notably fellow Texans Jimmie Vaughan and Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Dale Gilmore, Butch Hancock, Bobby Keys, Lloyd Maines, and Angela Strehli are just some of the artists who hail from this relatively desolate and isolated area.

Delbert McClinton describes Lubbock as “[f]lat and dry as far as you could see. Maybe a mesquite tree once in a while. They said people would pile buffalo shit or whatever they could find as a point of reference. There was nothing as far as you could see. And it was originally a buffalo slaughtering town.”¹¹

As to the question regarding why Lubbock, and West Texas in general, have produced so many talented musicians, McClinton responds:

I don’t know, but I always loved music. It was everywhere out there. As a kid, Bob Wills was *the* big deal. My parents would go dancing at the Cotton

bigger. That music was the soundtrack of my childhood. The radio was on all the time. And man, I loved those Johnny Mercer songs of hope and blue skies,” he recalls.¹³

Herman and Vivian McClinton also took their children to some of the traveling tent shows that passed through Lubbock. “Those big Harley Sadler traveling tent shows that came to town every year were a big deal. It didn’t matter what kind of music they played, we went. And like I said, Lubbock being what it was, there wasn’t a damned thing to do, so we looked forward to it. It was always kind of a big deal.”¹⁴

Because his father was a metro bus driver, Delbert and his brother had a free pass and often went exploring Lubbock on the city bus. “We could get from one end of town to the other in about ten minutes back then,” he said, “but we saw brand new things in all parts of town every day.”¹⁵

The Cost of Living: Fort Worth

In 1951, when he was eleven, McClinton’s family moved to Fort Worth, Texas. His father’s old military injuries had developed into nearly debilitating back issues from driving a city bus for long hours over rough roads throughout Lubbock, so he took a job on the Rock Island railroad line as a brakeman and was soon promoted to switchman.

The move from Lubbock allowed Delbert McClinton to roam freely around the Fort Worth railyards by day, while at night, he was exposed to a whole new range of musical styles broadcast on radio stations stretching from the Dallas-Fort

school a half credit shy in English,” admits the award winning singer-songwriter.²⁰

Despite any public school curricula he may have missed, McClinton was experiencing a different type of “education” on the streets and byways around Fort Worth. He and his pre-teen friends camped in the railyard and spent time exploring drainage pipes and shortcuts around the tracks. “After school, my friends and I would take off for the tracks and play out there till dark or later, like kids used to do,” he says. “We would ride our bikes to the edge of town, cross the tracks to the ‘hump,’ or the switching yard. Sometimes we’d camp out

I migrated toward that sound. That day, that moment, that song, that voice, that music. It was my first conscious attraction to music. It touched my soul.

Worth area north and eastward to Chicago, Memphis, and Nashville, and south to the Texas-Mexican border, where largely unregulated “border radio” stations blasted an eclectic mix of country, blues, R&B, conjunto, gospel, and rock and roll across the country and as far north as Canada.¹⁶

“XERF — Border Radio,” he recalls. “Even today you can hear those Mexico border stations. They have always been a big part of Texas music — and you can hear it in my music. Tex-Mex is as good a word for it as any. Doug [Sahm] picked up on that as a kid in San Antonio, and he was the king of it. He is one unsung hero.”¹⁷ McClinton fondly recalls his youth as a great time to experience Texas and American music. He says, “If you were around and in the right places at that time, you were bombarded with some of the best music ever played.”¹⁸

McClinton continues, “Today, music industry people dominate a lot of what you get to hear, so you don’t get to hear new sounds, real soul, and true spirit in the music. You don’t get anything right from the source. What do they call it, ‘radio-friendly?’ Music in Texas sounds like music in Tennessee or music in California. But back then, we got to listen to XERF in Villa Acuña, KNOK Radio, the all-black station in Fort Worth, KFJZ Top 40, WLS out of Chicago.”¹⁹

Despite enjoying access to all this new and richly diverse music in Fort Worth, it was still a rough time for McClinton, adjusting to living in a new town, attending new schools, and making new friends. He had even been forced to leave his dogs behind in Lubbock. Although he made new friends at school, he acknowledges that he was not always a model student. “In fact, I got kicked out of choir and finished high

and go to sleep listening to the workers make up trains. We’d camp out like hobos and build a campfire and shoot .410s. We could cut through this big drain tunnel without walking across the tracks or climbing between the trains and get to the other side of the yard.”²¹

It was on one of those adventures through the tunnel that McClinton’s life changed forever:

I was eleven. We had been shooting cans with our .410s out at the Fort Worth railyard. I came up out of the tunnel. We were cutting across to Old Stove Foundry Road, running like kids do, even when you don’t really have any place to go. We went running by this black barbecue joint with trays on the car windows and big speakers blasting loud music. I heard “Honey Hush,” by Big Joe Turner for the first time. I felt something that started in my ears and ran through me like an electrical shock. It wasn’t like anything I had ever heard before. I migrated toward that sound. That day, that moment, that song, that voice, that music. It was my first conscious attraction to music. It touched my soul. Until that day, I didn’t know music could do that to you. It was like falling in love. There’s nothing like that first time.²²

Before long, McClinton’s lifelong interest in music, combined with his more recent exposure to a wealth of new musical experiences, helped inspire him to try his hand at performing:

I was in junior high. Both my brothers had friends who came into our house on a regular basis, carrying guitars. But the magical day was one afternoon when I came in from school and heard someone singing a Hank Williams song, right there in our house. We lived in a shotgun duplex. I came into the house and headed straight to the sound. There was my brother Jack’s friend, Ray Harden. He was on the floor, leaning against the wall with his feet up on the door jamb like a hammock, playing an old guitar with a hole the size of a fist busted in it. He told me he stepped on it one night when he was drunk. Man, I even thought that was cool. ... The second time was when my brother, Randall, brought his friend, Joe Don Sanders, over with a guitar. Joe Don taught me how to play. Then Randall and I decided we needed a guitar so we pooled our money and came up with about \$3.45. We bought an old Stella, the sorriest guitar ever made. The strings down by the hole were so far off, we couldn’t tune that thing. Our fingers bled ... and by that time, I was looking to put a band together.²³

Soon McClinton’s persistence began to pay off, as he and his bandmates moved from practicing in private at home to performing in public:

I was fronting my first band in junior high. We were not very good, but we played our hearts out. It was me and my brother Randall and Joe Don — three guitars, no bass. We had a drummer, Ray Clark, who only had a snare and a ride cymbal. We could not play worth shit. So, we decided to add another guitar player. We got Joe Don’s older brother, Gatemouth, and we were the Mellow Fellows. Our biggest show was fronting Jerry Lee Lewis on a package show at the Sportatorium in Dallas, a big coliseum usually used for wrestling matches. It was going to be Jerry Lee’s first time in Dallas. We played first on a Big D Jamboree package show of about five or six bands. We played a thirty-minute set, early rock and roll, rockabilly, Elvis stuff, Coasters, “Goodnight, sweetheart, it’s time to go.” ... I was playing rhythm guitar and we weren’t any good, but we didn’t know any better, and the crowd didn’t know any better. We loved them, and they loved us.²⁴

By the summer of 1957, Delbert McClinton was almost seventeen. Rock and roll was fast becoming the most popular

music among American youth. Construction had begun on President Dwight Eisenhower’s new Interstate Highway System, and talk was that car travel would never be the same. That summer, McClinton’s aunt and uncle came to Fort Worth to visit and invited him to ride back home with them to Cocoa Beach, Florida. “My Aunt Billie Rae Gregory may have been the first person to really believe in me and my music. She took me to the Starlight Motel on Cape Canaveral. They had a talent show every Wednesday. I got up and sang ‘Going Steady’ by Tommy Sands and ‘That’s All Right, Mama’ by Elvis. It went pretty good,” McClinton recalls.²⁵

The Starlight Motel invited McClinton back to perform again, so his aunt rented a small Martin guitar from the local music store and dyed his hair jet black. She enjoyed playing rock and roll “dress up” with her nephew, and he played along. McClinton also performed at the motel whenever he could. In the meantime, he kept waiting to hear from his parents. Through his railroad job, Herman McClinton was supposed to be sending his son a free train ticket home, although it was understood that this might take a couple of weeks.

McClinton remembers that, in those days, “No one called long distance unless someone had died, but we had a way to beat the system by calling person to person through the operator. So every few days, I would call home and ask the operator to let me speak with ‘R.I. Ticket.’ And they would not take the call, which was code for ‘there is no ticket here.’ So I kept playing that little guitar and going to the Starlight on Wednesday nights.”²⁶

It was Delbert McClinton’s first time away from home, and he could see that the world was changing before his eyes. He got to witness an early space missile test launch along the Florida coastline. “We were fishing for blue crab,” he says, “when my uncle said, ‘Look way over there,’ and we saw the thing blast off into the sky.”²⁷

McClinton’s personal world was changing, too, as he began to experience the ups and downs of the music business through his ongoing performances at the Starlight Motel. “I had played my songs and got off the stage and a woman came up. She said she was from Capitol Records and gave me her card. She liked what she heard and said she would call me. I was seventeen, then. It’s only been, what, fifty-eight years ago? I still haven’t heard from her but I’m not giving up hope,” he laughs.²⁸

The train ticket back to Fort Worth finally arrived, and the first thing McClinton did when he got home was walk into the T. H. Conn Music Store and lay down \$100 to purchase a mahogany Martin guitar. He was more serious than ever about playing music for the rest of his life. Although he became increasingly convinced that he wanted to pursue a career in music, McClinton felt pressure to complete his public school

education. Still needing half a credit in English to earn his high school diploma, he went back at the age of 21 for one final attempt at finishing his degree. “Over and over, my dad said, ‘Without that high school diploma in your back pocket you won’t amount to a hill of beans.’ And a hill of beans is not very tall.”²⁹

He never did complete the coursework to earn a diploma, but McClinton’s passion for music continued to grow. It would be years before he developed the sound and performance style for which he became famous. However, McClinton already was demonstrating his eagerness to adopt and adapt a wide range of musical influences. He also made it clear early on that, despite his talent for innovation, he was deeply respectful of the older pioneers of blues, R&B, and other African American traditions that formed the foundation of his ever-expanding musical repertoire.

Nationally syndicated television and radio host Don Imus argues that this is a reflection of McClinton’s commitment to preserving the “authenticity” of roots-based music, while not

McClinton’s musical career. He began writing poetry in high school, first publishing his work in the Arlington Heights school newspaper, *The Jacket Journal*, on December 19, 1957. “Everyone in my English class had to write a Christmas poem for a contest. I won. It was published on the front page — ‘Christmas to the Blind’ — and it described ... a blind person ... and the excitement surrounding Christmas. ‘To a boy whose eyes cannot guide him / Christmas is his own private dream ... His heart will be filled with Christmas cheer / and we’ll be the ones who are blind,’” he recites from memory.³²

McClinton began writing songs about that same time. At first, his songwriting was a patchwork quilt of different styles and genres, since he had not yet learned to blend those influences seamlessly into his own sound. In an interview with Texas music historian Kathleen Hudson, McClinton said, “I’ve probably been influenced by everybody I’ve heard because I like a little bit of everything. The only conscious direction that I believe I’ve ever taken is that I’m not trying to copy anybody else.”³³

Gregg Andrews points to McClinton as an example of the type of songwriter who creates “Texas music,” as opposed to music that is simply made in Texas.

being afraid to innovate and create a new style that reflected his eclectic tastes. “One thing that helped at that time,” Imus says, “was that Delbert was a white guy singing the blues and singing well and authentically, as opposed to the white artists ripping off black artists, like Pat Boone ripping off Little Richard and Chuck Berry. I heard that when I was in high school and was deeply offended by it. White people like Delbert and Elvis were embracing black blues and performing it well. And they became accepted by the African American community — no bigotry and no racism.”³⁰

Gregg Andrews, Professor Emeritus at Texas State University, and co-founder of the Center for Texas Music History, remarks on this cross-generational blending of musical traditions, especially in relation to Texas music. “It’s important to remember that what we call ‘Texas music’ is not static. It’s dynamic and constantly being reshaped, redefined, and cross-fertilized across ethnic, class, and generational, as well as geographical lines.”³¹ While continuing to develop as a performer, McClinton proved increasingly adept at blurring the boundaries among a variety of roots-music genres.

Songwriting has been another important part of Delbert

Gregg Andrews points to McClinton as an example of the type of songwriter who creates “Texas music,” as opposed to music that is simply made in Texas. Andrews explains, “As a mecca for songwriters looking to draw inspiration from its diverse cultural influences and historic dance halls, honkytonks, blues clubs, and other numerous venues, Texas attracts many. ... [They are] drawn to the spirit of independence, anti-slickness, and insistence on creative control among musicians.”³⁴

Inducted into the Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2011, along with his old friend and bandmate, Bruce Channel (from Grapevine, Texas), and songwriting partner, Gary Nicholson (from Garland, Texas), Delbert McClinton is quick to credit the many Lone Star State songwriters who came before him. “I couldn’t believe Roger Miller (born in Fort Worth) wasn’t in that hall of fame before I was,” McClinton says. “He was another one of the best.”³⁵



The RonDels. Courtesy Delbert McClinton Family Archives.

Right to Be Wrong: Coming of Age in a Texas Roadhouse

By the late 1950s, Delbert McClinton was establishing a reputation around Fort Worth as a dynamic performer who combined a wide variety of musical styles into his repertoire. Two of his early bands, the Straitjackets and later the RonDels, played regular shows at Jack’s Place and other local roadhouses on the Jacksboro Highway, which ran northwest out of downtown Fort Worth. The Jacksboro Highway (Texas State Highway 199) was notorious for its rowdy roadhouses and illegal gambling parlors, several of which were owned and/or frequented by organized crime figures. It was a tough environment for a bunch of young, struggling musicians, but it also provided an opportunity for McClinton and his bandmates to grow as performers and build a following. “We played a lot of Jimmy Reed, B. B. King, Haunted House, Bobby Bland, New Orleans Rocking Pneumonia kind of stuff. As will happen with young bands, the Straitjackets broke up after a time, and we reinvented the band as the RonDels, with my friend Ronny Kelly and a couple of other musicians,” McClinton explains.³⁶

The rough and tumble nightclub scene on the outskirts of Fort Worth provided a fertile musical incubator for

McClinton. Those who knew him at the time have commented on his unquenchable passion for music, which he seemed to be always either listening to or performing. “You had to know Fort Worth in the 1950s to understand McClinton’s unquestioning obedience to his obsession,” writes *Rolling Stone* journalist Gary Cartwright. “It was a unique city experiencing a unique age—an adolescent, slightly schizophrenic, bawdy, brawling cow town looking for a quick ride and celebrating its rites of passage. ... Just below the surface of the white fundamentalist illusion was an enormous multiracial underbelly of outlaws, scammers, and downtrodden survivors.”³⁷

Cartwright continues, “By the late ’50s, McClinton’s band, the Straitjackets, were the house band at Jack’s Place. I think they were the only white band that ever played at Jack’s but they didn’t sound white. They played backup for the stars who came through on weekends and were the house band the rest of the week. Delbert’s first record, a cover of Sonny Boy Williamson’s ‘Wake Up Baby,’ had so much soul, it was the first white single to be played on KNOK, Fort Worth’s black radio station.”³⁸

Nashville Tennessean music writer Michael McCall says, “McClinton’s raspy, ferocious voice carries in it the history of American popular music. There’s the down-home rhythm and testifying punch of gospel-based R&B, the aggressive snarl of

the blues, the mournful rumination of honky-tonk, the jaunty spirit of swing, and the up-front sexuality of early rock ’n’ roll.” McCall adds, “Texas in general and Fort Worth in particular have long been a major source of the music that binds us all — blues, jazz, Western swing, rock ’n’ roll, R&B, country — and musicians there were expected to play most of it and make people dance to all of it.”³⁹

The local nightclub scene was not the only source of musical inspiration for McClinton. In 1961, the year McClinton turned twenty-one, Robert Weston Smith, better known as “Wolfman Jack,” debuted on XERF radio in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, just across the Rio Grande from Del Rio, Texas. Broadcasting at 250,000 watts (at the time U.S. radio stations

they had become the regular house band for the Skyliner Ballroom, the management roped off an area and told the band members that they had to sit there on breaks lest they be tempted to drink. “But on my twenty-first birthday,” McClinton remembers, “we were playing Jack’s Place; that night, we were going to be backing Bo Diddley. On the way to the gig, I stopped at a liquor store and bought a pint of Wild Turkey. I didn’t drink back then, so I didn’t know much, but from all I knew, it was the coolest one. Bo Diddley was playing that night and my band was backing him up. I missed the show. Yeah, I took two or three shots, I passed out on stage and someone hauled me off into Jack Padgett’s office. I learned a big lesson that night. But not before I did it again,” he admits.⁴²

The wide range of musical styles played by Wolfman Jack and others on XERF had a powerful impact on Delbert McClinton and thousands of other aspiring musicians.

were limited to 50,000 watts), XERF claimed to be the most powerful radio station in North America. A Virginia native, Wolfman Jack had worked on radio in Shreveport, Louisiana, before joining XERF. Following in the footsteps of his mentor, famed radio disk jockey Alan “Moondog” Freed, Wolfman Jack played an important role in the early development of rock and roll by broadcasting an eclectic mix of blues, R&B, country, and rockabilly to millions of young listeners across the country.⁴⁰

The wide range of musical styles played by Wolfman Jack and others on XERF had a powerful impact on Delbert McClinton and thousands of other aspiring musicians. Having enjoyed a diverse range of musical genres since childhood, McClinton was particularly receptive to what he heard on XERE, which included blues, country, conjunto, R&B, western swing, gospel, and other styles. In addition to XERE, McClinton listened to Fort Worth’s black music station, KNOK. “Jimmy Reed had big hits and was on the radio all the time. I got my first harmonica and started trying to play like him. Muddy Waters was on there all the time. It was a good time for music. It was a great station. Their slogan was ‘KNOK has your stacks and wax and mounds of sounds for your listening pleasure,’ and I sure got a lot of pleasure from that station,” he recalls.⁴¹

McClinton and his bandmates had started playing in clubs long before they reached the legal drinking age of 21. While

McClinton is referring to another time when he was sitting backstage with Buster Brown and Sonny Boy Williamson drinking a fifth of Old Grand-Dad whiskey. “I was sitting in between them on the couch there, and double shotting it. Every time the bottle passed by, I took a shot. I missed that show too,” he shakes his head.⁴³ While these drinking incidents may have been part of a youthful rite of passage, alcohol did not seriously disrupt his career trajectory or prevent him from garnering the attention of music businessmen, especially Major Bill Smith, a Fort Worth record producer.

Major Bill, as he was commonly called, was a former Army Air Corps bomber pilot, shot down and wounded over Germany. After the war, he became a public relations officer at Carswell Air Force Base near Fort Worth and soon became involved in the budding Texas music industry. Major Bill Smith, who was once described as a “relentless self-promoter who was disinclined to let the facts get in the way of a good story,” set up a studio in the basement of the old KFJZ radio station in Fort Worth.⁴⁴ KFJZ began in the 1940s as a country station, but by the early 1960s, it was broadcasting what it advertised as a more sophisticated “beautiful music format,” although this description ran counter to most of the music Smith actually recorded in the basement studio.⁴⁵

Major Bill Smith owned several record labels. His first big success came in 1956 with Sonny James’s “Twenty Feet of Muddy Water.” Smith followed this with other regional hits

and spent a lot of time searching for local talent in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.⁴⁶ He hired Delbert McClinton and his band to be the primary session musicians for the studio. McClinton recalls that “if there was any time left on the clock after [others were finished recording], he would give it to me. We did a few covers, like Sonny Boy Williamsons’s ‘Don’t Start Me Talking,’ and on one of those extra times we recorded one of my songs, ‘If You Really Want Me To, I’ll Go.’”⁴⁷

In 1961, Marvin “Smokey” Montgomery, longtime member of the popular Texas band the Light Crust Doughboys, met a promising young singer named Bruce Channel from the Dallas suburb of Grapevine. Channel was only twenty-one, but he already had experience as a vocalist, along with a growing ambition to become a professional songwriter.⁴⁸ Channel says, “I would hear songs that I liked and look up the people who wrote them and learn their songs. I wanted to be a songwriter. I was always more influenced by the writers than the singers. But you have to get out there and play those songs for someone,” he explains. So, Channel put together a band and played local dances and sock hops, eventually performing on the popular Dallas-based radio program the Big D Jamboree. He then landed a six-month regular spot on the Louisiana Hayride. Following that, Channel returned to the Dallas-Fort Worth area.⁴⁹

Marvin “Smokey” Montgomery introduced Channel to Major Bill Smith, and soon the young singer was recording in the KFJZ basement studio. McClinton recalls, “That kid could sing his ass off, and Major Bill called me and my band in to back him on a couple of songs. I remember that session like yesterday — or the day before yesterday. Jimmy Gordie played guitar, Bruce (Channel) played rhythm. ... Jerry Foster played drums, and I played harmonica. ‘Hey Baby’ was the A side and we backed it with another of Bruce’s songs, ‘Dream Girl.’”⁵⁰

Channel also remembers the day clearly:

I walked into the studio with Marvin Montgomery and saw a friendly face, Bob Sullivan, who had been the engineer on the Louisiana Hayride. ... I played through my songs, just me and the guitar, and McClinton’s band, the Straitjackets, listened. Then, just like that, McClinton kicked off “Hey Baby” with his harmonica — with that intro you know so well. McClinton is just a virtuoso with that thing — all he has to do is hear what you are doing and he will find the key and play it — he just kicked it off with that harmonica — and his band jumped in and knew what to do. We recorded it once, twice, and then Marvin came in and put some piano on it the third time and that was history. Delbert’s harmonica

intro was so true. It was what identified the song. It was different. Everyone knew the song with that first harmonica lick, and I guess you’d have to agree that little song has stood the test of time.⁵¹

McClinton recalls, “Major Bill had about six labels, but Smash was the offshoot of a major label. Major Bill got a deal with Smash and [“Hey, Baby”] became a world-wide hit. We all made five dollars for that session. We always made five dollars a session; it was just ‘roll and play’ recording — no overdubs, nothing fancy, but I guess that five dollars took me a long way.”⁵²

In the spring of 1961, “Hey Baby” became a No. 1 hit in *Billboard Magazine*, remaining at the top of the charts for three weeks. Soon, Bruce Channel went on a national tour with Fats Domino, Brook Benton, Don and Juan, The Impressions, and The Duke of Earl (Gene Chandler). “We started in New York and went down the East Coast and then across and up to Denver and ended in Houston,” Channel says. “They had a tour band for the whole show, so I went out as a single, and they tried to replicate McClinton’s harmonica part with horns.”⁵³

Although racial segregation was still common throughout the country at the time, Channel believes that audiences were not bothered by black and white musicians sharing the stage on that 1961 tour. He says, “When you look back at it, the music really was a universal language that brought people together. The audience wasn’t looking at our music as black or white. It was either good or bad. When we were on stage, we were the show. We had mixed audiences and they were there for the music. Crowds came in for the same thing night after night, to hear good music. It was the new sound of our generation. We liked Frank Sinatra, but Elvis broke the flood gates between the races. And Bill Haley, playing ‘Rock Around The Clock,’ — that was rock with a steel guitar! Everyone was doing something different and breaking the mold, and we were all looking for ourselves in our music. In ‘Hey Baby,’ Delbert and I found ourselves on top of the world.”⁵⁴

Delbert McClinton and John Lennon

“Hey Baby” soon blasted across the Atlantic, and concert promoters wanted Bruce Channel to perform in England. Channel recalls, “So, they had a British band ready to back me up — Johnny Kidd and the Pirates. I told Major Bill that I just could not do it without McClinton. I could not have done it with just that British band, and, boy, he saved our bacon over there. Everyone loved that harmonica. Everybody loved Delbert.”⁵⁵ “And because Bruce wanted that harmonica



on the tour, that started a whole new life for me,” McClinton acknowledges.⁵⁶

Delbert McClinton traveled with Major Bill Smith to London, arriving the day before Bruce Channel was scheduled to arrive. “We got to the airport, landed in London, got in the cab went to the hotel, and I left my bag of harmonicas in the cab. That was all I was there for — to play harmonica, and I had already lost my tools.”⁵⁷ Fortunately, Smith located a Hohner harmonica factory nearby. As McClinton recalls, he and Smith were preparing to go and buy a new set of harmonicas “when the cab driver walked into the hotel and asked if I had left my harmonicas in the car. He returned them.”⁵⁸

It was on this tour that McClinton met a relatively unknown singer and guitarist named John Lennon. Both twenty-two-year old musicians had a lot in common and spent several days hanging out together. McClinton explains:

The Beatles were opening for us on the tour. They would open the show, then I would play three songs or so, and then Bruce would come out and we would do the headliner set. John wanted me to give him some tips on harmonica. The story’s been romanticized. I didn’t really teach him. I showed him what I did. When to suck and when to blow. Nothing really more than that ... although it was a great moment in time. I did hang out with John a few nights when we were off. The Beatles were playing regular gigs at the time at The Cavern, an underground old cellar in an old building. The club was pretty empty when we got there, and I sort of looked at John and thought, “what the — ?” Then, in no time, the place filled up, body to body. On one of our nights off, John came by the hotel with a friend of his, and they took me out and showed me things I never imagined. Beatnik joints, beanbag chairs, and people just laying over in the corner [having sex], you know? I mean they sure didn’t do that in Fort Worth. It was that European intensity in the ’60s. It was weird but it was something to see.⁵⁹

McClinton continues:

It got to be every night on the (six week) tour, somebody from another band would come to the dressing room because there wasn’t that much harmonica going on in anything but blues music. It wasn’t going on in rock and roll. And they wanted me to teach them how I did it. Well, you can’t teach anybody, but you can kind of show them. And that is what I did. And, yeah, one night it was John. He wanted to know how I did that, and we shot the shit on that and hung out and then ... [y]ears later, somewhere along the line he mentioned to some reporter that he was influenced by the harmonica on “Hey Baby,” and it’s become “I’ve taught him everything he knows.” It’s been romanticized a great deal, as those stories are, but that’s exactly what it was. We were both twenty-two. We hung out. We were on common ground. We were just two guys who couldn’t get enough of it. Wanting to learn everything we could about this crazy business.⁶⁰

Back in Texas

Following the British tour, Delbert McClinton returned to Texas and continued playing with legendary blues musicians

in Fort Worth, touring when he could, and recording for Major Bill Smith. Along the way, McClinton managed to be on the front row of several unforgettable moments in history. He was one of the last people to see President John F. Kennedy, less than an hour before the assassination, as the presidential motorcade passed through Fort Worth. The motorcade stopped right in front of the young singer, who was standing on the street corner on his way to run an errand for his boss. “Kennedy and I locked eyes. We smiled at each other,” McClinton recalls. “I got back to the shop and told my boss I had just seen President Kennedy up close. He said, ‘The president was just shot in Dallas. Listen. It’s on the radio.’ It was unreal.”⁶¹

Aside from the trip to Florida at age seventeen and the British tour with Bruce Channel, McClinton had never traveled much outside of the Fort Worth area. His parents

We were both twenty-two. We hung out. We were on common ground. We were just two guys who couldn’t get enough of it. Wanting to learn everything we could about this crazy business.

still lived in Fort Worth, and, for the time being, McClinton seemed content to stay close to home. He may have been staying put, but he was not standing still. Important changes were taking place in his life. McClinton had married and now had a son, Monty, but the marriage did not last long. He says about this first marriage, “It wasn’t quite the hell that it soon became. It was not good, but it wasn’t dangerous yet.”⁶²

McClinton continued to grow and develop as a musician, too. Already a fan of Texas country singer Ray Price, McClinton remembers the first time he heard Jerry Lee Lewis’s version of Price’s classic tune “Crazy Arms.” Hearing Jerry Lee Lewis rock that traditional country shuffle made McClinton realize that he, too, could take a song and reinterpret it with his own rhythm, phrasing, and style in order to “make it his own.” Like many other musicians of his generation, Delbert McClinton was quickly discovering that long-standing boundaries which separated different genres of music in commercial radio could be ignored. This allowed artists an unprecedented freedom to blend seemingly disparate styles, reinterpret old standards in any way they wished, and redefine the parameters of popular music. This creative breakthrough would prove valuable as McClinton began an important new phase in his musical career.

The California Years

In 1972, Delbert McClinton relocated to Los Angeles to try and further his musical career. Although it would be a difficult time for him personally, it also was a productive time in terms of evolving as a songwriter and performer. McClinton’s move to the West Coast was prompted by his longtime friend and musical partner, Glen Clark, another Fort Worth musician who had played keyboard off and on with the singer for years. Clark made the move to Los Angeles in 1969, and wrote to McClinton, encouraging him to head west.

Clark’s father was a song leader in a Fort Worth area Church of Christ congregation. Music had a near constant presence in the Clark household. Everyone in the family played piano and sang, and Glen Clark was somewhat of a child prodigy. He successfully auditioned for the Texas Boys Choir when he was 10 years old and within weeks was touring with the group. “It

was a pretty big deal at the time,” Clark says.⁶³

Glen Clark was about seven years old when he first heard secular music being performed live. He was spending the night with his friend, Vaughn Clark (no relation). Vaughn’s father had been a drummer for Lawrence Welk and had long cultivated an interest in music among his children. Vaughan’s fifteen-year-old brother, Ray, “was playing drums in a band with some of his high school friends. Delbert was the bandleader. He was already rocking. Man, I wanted to be just like that guy,” Glen recalls. “The Texas Boys Choir was a little too regimented,” he admits. “I got out of it pretty quick. Here I was singing Latin masses with the Texas Boys Choir. I discovered black radio stations and country radio stations, and I hear high school kids I know playing this great stuff that made my hair stand up on end. I went to my classical piano teacher and asked her to teach me that. She just couldn’t teach me to play with soul. So I made the switch from classical to rock and blues and country.”⁶⁴

Glen Clark started performing in bands regularly at the age of 16, playing piano with the popular Bobby Crown and the Capers, a blues and R&B group. Bobby Crown, McClinton, and Bruce Channel all were inspired by that same Texas blues shuffle that became an integral part of what some were calling “the Fort Worth sound.”

Clark says, “Everyone wanted to do that music, but Delbert made it his own. Even back then. He had his own spin on the music. He respected the styles, learned from them and built on them. Delbert has always been a master of that. He can take a combination of sounds from different bands and styles and make it his own. He has always kept that edge that made you know you were listening to something you wouldn’t forget.”⁶⁵

Clark started performing on keyboards regularly with McClinton in 1968, playing a few regular gigs and an after-hours weekly show at Fort Worth’s Colonial Club, near the General Motors plant. “It was plain awful. We thought it was going to be great, because the show started at 2 a.m. We figured that we could play our original music and kick back and just get in the groove, but the factory shift workers would get off work about that time and come in and want to be rowdy and drink and listen to Top 40 Country. I think it was probably one of the roughest regular gigs Delbert and I ever played, and that’s saying a lot. That was the last band Delbert and I were in together in Texas. We called ourselves ‘The Losers,’” Clark recalls.⁶⁶

Clark moved to Los Angeles in 1969. “I was wanting to do original music. Our friend, Ray Clark, had moved out to L.A. and had a place for us to stay. I was trying to write songs and playing in North Texas where no one wanted to hear original music. Ray said, ‘They’ll love your original stuff out here,’ and he was right. The climate was different. They wanted to hear original music. I only had about four or five original songs good enough to play when I got there, but I played them a lot and wrote some more. Delbert was going through a hard time. I wrote him a letter and told him to come on out. We had a place for him to stay. I forgot to mention that housekeeping was not a priority.”⁶⁷

McClinton was still playing around Fort Worth and had taken up with an old friend named Maggie who had recently divorced. She had a 1966 Chrysler Imperial and some money from her divorce settlement. The Los Angeles music scene was booming, and several Texas songwriters already had moved there. So, McClinton and Maggie piled what they could carry in the back of her car and headed west together.⁶⁸ Upon arriving, they moved in with Glen and Ray Clark and Ray’s girlfriend. As McClinton describes it, “We became hippies.”⁶⁹

After a few weeks, Glen Clark, McClinton, and Maggie rented their own apartment together. McClinton remembers, “We got this place with a bedroom and middle room with a mattress on the floor and a kitchen and a bathroom. The whole place was painted black — floor, ceiling, sink, everything — and it had four locks on the front door. I don’t remember the real name of the apartments, but they were better known as ‘Methedrine Manor.’ The only thing that

came through the windows were the police lights on the street every night. They’d fill the room with red and blue light. Ray had gotten Glen and me jobs at a veterinary supply warehouse in West L.A. A lot of days I’d be sweeping out my corner of the warehouse, wondering, what the hell I was doing here. We were hungry, but, man, we were living the dream, or working toward it.”⁷⁰

The relationship with Maggie did not last long. The day she left, McClinton sat on the mattress in that dank, black apartment and wrote a song about sweeping out a warehouse in West Los Angeles. In 1978, “Two More Bottles of Wine” became a Number 1 hit on the country charts for singer Emmylou Harris and marked a major milestone in McClinton’s evolution as a songwriter.

*I’m sixteen hundred miles from the people I know
Been doing all I can but opportunity sure comes slow
Thought I’d be a star by today
But I’m sweeping out a warehouse in West L.A.
But it’s all right, ‘cause it’s midnight
And I got two more bottles of wine.*⁷¹

Less than ten years after writing those lines, McClinton talked to journalist Gary Cartwright for an interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine. McClinton recalled that he felt better after the song was finished. “I’d hate to think I have to suffer like that every time I wrote a song,” he said. “I don’t ever want to be that depressed again, but I want to be an interpreter of those feelings ... a telling of the things I’ve done, not the things I do.”⁷²

Delbert McClinton and Glen Clark attracted some attention in the L.A. music scene and remained active writing songs, but they kept their day jobs. Clark recalls, “We would go to work at Sharpe and Vejar and sweep and pack boxes and unload 100 pound sacks of dog food from boxcars like a fire brigade when the trains would come through. It was hard work, but the bosses and everyone there knew that Delbert and I were trying to make music, and they were real supportive. We made minimum wage but we also made a lot of good friends. Even the bosses would support our music. We’d get off around 3:30 or 4:00, and take the Pacific Coast Highway leaving West L.A., driving back to Topanga Canyon. We’d light up a joint and look out at the ocean and say, ‘Oh, yeah. We don’t have to be back at work till eight o’clock tomorrow.”⁷³

McClinton and Clark made a demo recording with Ray Clark on drums. Ray managed to get the recording to Hal Wynn at Medallion Records, who liked their sound so much that he reached into a drawer and pulled out a contract. He signed up Delbert and Glen as “McClinton and Clark” and

promised that if they later wanted out of the contract, he would simply tear it up.⁷⁴

McClinton and Clark left Wynn’s office and immediately began having second thoughts about signing the contract. Clark remembers, “I said to Delbert, ‘I still think we ought to go see Daniel Moore.’ Moore was an independent producer I had met a year before. If he liked our demo, an independent producer would sign us, shop the demo and get us a deal. So, we went to see him. We told him, ‘We signed with this other guy, but we really like you,’ and Daniel said to try to get out of the other contract if we could. We called Hal and, as he had promised, he tore up the contract. We went in with

We had the mattress I was born on under a camper shell in the back of the pickup and took turns sleeping back there. Sometimes the
Feds would show up at the gig and want all of our money. I never
thought of doing anything else.

Daniel and made a three song demo which led to a showcase and a record deal as ‘Delbert and Glen,’ with Clean Records, a subsidiary of Atlantic. Looking back, it seems like it was overnight, but it wasn’t really.”⁷⁵

Delbert and Glen made two albums for Clean Records, blending together all of those Texas sounds that they had grown up hearing. Los Angeles music critic Richie Unterberger reviewed their first, self-titled album, describing it as “very much a Texas record, despite their California transplantation, blending blues, country, soul, gospel, and rock & roll. The feel of the album is very much that of a seasoned bar band, albeit a bar band with mostly original material.”⁷⁶ Those Texas roots would continue to show through in McClinton and Clark’s music, despite their transformation from Fort Worth blues prodigies to West Los Angeles hippies.

Delbert and Glen enjoyed modest success on Clean Records, but they soon began following separate career paths. In 1974, McClinton signed with ABC, but, as luck would have it, all of the label’s top executives were fired the following week. “So, nobody knew I was on their label for the first year,” he says in an interview with blues historian Alan Govenar, “but I ended up doing three albums for them. I was going to be their ‘Progressive Texan.’ After the third album, ABC went out of business. So, I went with Capricorn, who had done well with The Allman Brothers, but that was petering out too. I had two albums with

them, and the week I had a song go into *Billboard* Top 100, Capricorn declared bankruptcy, and all the telephones were disconnected.”⁷⁷

From Texas to Tennessee

Delbert McClinton left L.A. and went home to Texas, met his second wife, and had his second son, Clay, in the fall of 1974. They lived in Fort Worth for a while before moving to Austin to check out the Progressive Country Music scene that was attracting national attention at the time. However, McClinton and his family soon relocated to Nashville to focus

on the ABC Records project. In 1975, he released his first solo project, *Victim of Life’s Circumstances*. For the rest of the decade, McClinton produced a string of successful albums and songs. By 1980, he had signed with Capitol Records and released his Top Ten hit, “Givin’ It Up For Your Love,” which had been recorded at Muscle Shoals Sound studios.

Changes in tax laws and a lack of sound tax advice caused McClinton (and his friend Willie Nelson) problems with the Internal Revenue Service during the early 1980s. McClinton did not receive much media attention during those years, but he remained active musically. “I wasn’t lost. I know where I was,” McClinton says. “I was working for the I.R.S. They decided that I owed them several hundred thousand dollars. So, I was playing for \$700 a night and traveling with the band, in a pickup truck with a camper shell and a U-Haul trailer. We had the mattress I was born on under a camper shell in the back of the pickup and took turns sleeping back there. Sometimes the Feds would show up at the gig and want all of our money. I never thought of doing anything else. We always managed to get to the next gig, and things started to pick up speed after a while.”⁷⁸

During this low period in his life and career, McClinton met his third wife, Wendy Goldstein, a news producer for the NBC television network, who agreed to a date after he performed on the popular show *Saturday Night*

Live. Nearly 30 years later, they are still married. Thanks to Goldstein, McClinton resolved his problems with the I.R.S. and has celebrated some of the greatest successes of his career, including the birth of his third child, a daughter named Delaney. In an interview with *No Depression* magazine journalist Silas House, McClinton credits Wendy Goldstein for helping save his career and straighten out his life. “She just picked me up and dusted me off. She helped me when I wasn’t doing so good, told me I could get my act together and do better,” McClinton says. “She put me back together, helped me forgive myself and get better. I forgave me. I got better.”⁷⁹ McClinton and Goldstein have somewhat different stories regarding when and where they first met. “I met him through a mutual friend when he played in New York at the Lone Star Café in 1979 and again at the Bottom Line,” she recalls. “Then,

early ’80s were the cocaine decade in this country. I don’t want to say much about that, except to say that Wendy saved Delbert’s life. She even moved to Fort Worth to live with him, leaving that great job in New York. She went on the road with the band. She did it to save his life. She basically said, ‘That shit’s gonna stop or I’m out of here.’ And if she hadn’t been there then, we wouldn’t be here now. I honestly believe she is responsible for saving his life—and some of mine, too.”⁸² McClinton sometimes refers to Goldstein as “The Fixer,” not only for straightening out his business affairs, but also for taking care of his extended family. She has expended a tremendous amount of time and energy resolving problems with the I.R.S. and various tax accounting firms on behalf of McClinton, dealing with retirement health and pension programs for his parents, serving as an academic guidance counselor for his then

The late ’70s and early ’80s were the cocaine decade in this country. I don’t want to say much about that, except to say that Wendy saved Delbert’s life.

he played *Saturday Night Live*, and I went with a friend, since I worked two floors below *SNL*. I already loved his music, and I liked him. They were going to be playing in Philly and then in Washington. My good friend, Joan Scarangelo, was also doing radio for NBC in Washington, and I had been wanting to go down and see her. So I caught a ride with McClinton and the band on the bus.”⁸⁰ McClinton adds, “We decided to take a nap on the bus — and we spooned — and here we are.”⁸¹ Despite any uncertainty about the beginnings of their relationship, their personal and professional partnership seems to be based on a combination of mutual respect, astute business skills, a strong work ethic, and a deep love for each other and the music that has been central to their lives over the past three decades. McClinton and others close to the couple are quick to credit Goldstein for helping transform McClinton from a road-weary musician struggling to make \$700 a night to enjoying his current high level of critical and commercial success. James Pennebaker, who played fiddle and guitar with McClinton from 1976 through 1986, elaborates on this period in the singer’s career. “Wendy came along at the right time and saved Delbert’s life. We pushed it as far as we could. We played hard and then we played hard. The late ’70s and

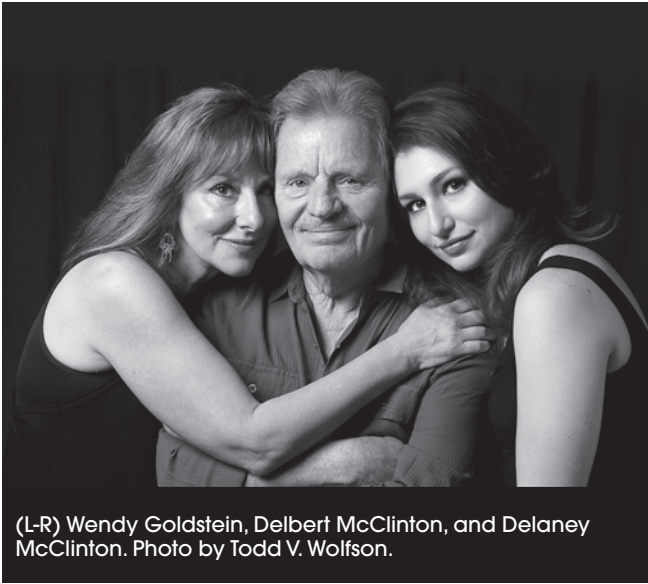
high school-aged son, Clay, and providing home investment assistance for McClinton’s older son, Monty. On January 31, 1989, Delbert McClinton and Wendy Goldstein moved back to Nashville, because, as McClinton explains, “I needed that songwriter’s community. ... I had never done much co-writing before, and Nashville is a really creative place to be. The way I look at it, if you’re going to pick cotton, you have to go to the cotton patch.”⁸³ The couple continues to call Nashville home.

Staying Power

After sixty years of performing, Delbert McClinton is more popular than ever. The three-time Grammy Award winner continues to sell out shows throughout the United States and abroad. McClinton earned his first Grammy nomination in 1989 for *Live from Austin* (Alligator Records) and his first win in 1991 for his duet with Bonnie Raitt on “Good Man, Good Woman.” The following year, Melissa Etheridge, John Prine, Lyle Lovett, and Tom Petty collaborated with McClinton on his projects, and he partnered with Tanya Tucker on the popular “Tell Me About It,” which became a Top Ten song in the *Billboard* Country charts.”⁸⁴

McClinton earned two more Grammys and topped the *Billboard* blues chart with a series of albums on New West Records in the 2000s, including *Nothing Personal*, *Cost of Living*, and *Acquired Taste*. He teamed up with Glen Clark again for his most recent release, *Blind, Crippled and Crazy*, also on the New West label. In the liner notes for McClinton’s 1994 *Honky Tonk ‘n Blues*, Joe Nick Patoski writes, “The easy way out would be to declare McClinton as the greatest voice to ever come out of Texas and be done with it.” He also adds, “Others work the milieu very well, but none so deftly obscures the color line that separates rhythm n’ blues from country and western as well as McClinton.”⁸⁵ On McClinton’s 1997 album, *One of the Fortunate Few*, journalist Nick Tosches writes:

It was Charles Olson, a poet bigger than Texas, who said, “He who controls rhythm/controls.” These words were first published in 1954, the year of Big Joe Turner’s “Shake Rattle and Roll,” of Elvis Presley’s first little record, the year most commonly associated with the dawn, the first full blast, of rock and roll. And though they are words that perfectly define and express the essence of the power of the greatest poets from Sappho to Dante, indeed to Olson himself, they also define and express the essence of the power of the greatest rock’n’rollers as well, from Big Joe Turner to Jerry Lee Lewis to the Rolling Stones to the guy whose latest record here lies at hand. ... Born in Lubbock, raised in Fort Worth, [McClinton] wrote his first song/poem on a scrap of Kotex paper in a high school classroom, made his first record in 1959,



(L-R) Wendy Goldstein, Delbert McClinton, and Delaney McClinton. Photo by Todd V. Wolfson.

and in the years since has lived a roadhouse odyssey ... whose telling yet awaits its honkytonk Homer.”⁸⁶

Musicologist Kathleen Hudson asked McClinton about his staying power in a 1997 interview. “You’ve been around so long. Why?” she asked. “Too broke to quit is the main thing that has kept me going,” he replied with a grin.⁸⁷ Nearly twenty years later, Hudson says, “Delbert is just Delbert. Whatever air he’s breathing and whatever song he is singing, he is being authentic. He has never tried to be anything else. It happens to cross color lines and genre lines and gives us a reason to shake our hips. That is heart and soul.”⁸⁸

Don Imus adds his thoughts about McClinton’s longevity in music. “Delbert can still sing. Lyle Lovett told me one time, ‘If we could all sing like we want to sing, we’d sing like Delbert.’ His phrasing is as good as Sinatra or anybody I’ve ever heard. He is one of the best artists I have ever heard. He is a wonderful songwriter. His lyrics are clever, and, yeah, he has God’s gift for a voice. And he’s a good person. He treats people right.”⁸⁹

Delbert McClinton and Willie Nelson have a lot in common beyond their well-publicized troubles with the I.R.S. Both have legions of devoted fans who refer to the singers by their first names, and both Nelson and McClinton seem to consider friends and fans as part of an extended “family.” This reciprocal sense of loyalty and affection, no doubt, also has been a key part of McClinton’s enduring success for the past sixty years.

One of McClinton’s oldest friends, Glen Clark, says, “I met Delbert when I was seven and he was fourteen. In sixty years, we’ve been through it all. We were poor as church mice, but we were doing it. We were taking a chance on a dream. We gave up what we had for what we wanted. We went on an adventure. We had trust and respect for each other even when we didn’t know what we were doing. We’ve had lots of ups and downs, and he has always been my reference point. If I have a weight I need to share, he is the first person I call. He always will be. He can count on me and I can count on him. Delbert is that kind of friend. I don’t know how you describe it. He’s like my brother. No matter where we are and how far apart we drift, we are never lost. We are always pretty caught up. He is my mentor, my friend, and my brother.”⁹⁰

Don Imus echoes that feeling when describing his friendship with McClinton. “I would do anything for Delbert. Well not anything. I am not going to give him my truck or my house, but he is such a good person, and he would do anything for me. There aren’t too many things I wouldn’t do for him.”⁹¹

Another key to Delbert McClinton’s long-term success is his ability to innovate and create, not just musically, but also in terms of business endeavors. One of the best recent examples of this are his wildly popular “Delbert McClinton & Friends

Sandy Beaches Cruises,” better known among veteran cruise aficionados as the “Delbert Cruises.” Started by McClinton’s friend, Gary Turlington, along with McClinton’s wife, Wendy Goldstein, the cruise has grown into one of the most popular annual events of its kind and features a remarkable array of artists from many different genres.

Gary Turlington is a retired third-generation architect and builder who lives in Lillington, North Carolina. One of McClinton’s best friends, Turlington has partnered with Goldstein on the Sandy Beaches Cruises for more than two decades. Goldstein handles band management, passenger relations, and sales, while Turlington runs the ship management, charter negotiations, stage management, and graphic design. January 2016 marks the 22nd annual Sandy Beaches Cruise, and most of the multigenerational patrons are veterans of previous trips.

“We had about a dozen musicians on that first cruise,” Turlington remembers. “Now we have about 35 artists, and about 60 shows, plus the informal jams that just happen in hallways and sitting areas. The cruise is habit forming for the musicians as well as the guests,” he admits. “Once they come on one, they all want to come back,” Turlington explains. “It’s become a family tradition. People who met on the cruise are now bringing their grown children, and it’s such a family event that just about everyone counts the cruises by how old Delbert and Wendy’s daughter, Delaney, is. She was a baby on the first cruise.”⁹²

More than simply a week-long vacation for musicians and fans, the cruise has become an important part of unifying and expanding the network of fans and friends that are such a vital part of McClinton’s extended musical “family.” The cruises are also a way in which McClinton can honor veteran artists, while also helping cultivate and promote younger musicians. By bringing together multiple generations of widely diverse musicians, many of whom end up sitting in on each other’s sets and playing together after hours, the cruises help introduce audiences and performers alike to a range of new styles, all of which are connected to McClinton’s own eclectic musical tastes. In several cases, the camaraderie that has developed among artists on these cruises has led to future collaborations, including national tours, song co-writing, and album projects.

James Pennebaker says, “God knows, Delbert has never been a superstar, but he has been able to blaze his own trail and do it his way. He has a fan base — more of a cult following — and he has done very well. No one has ever had more loyal fans, and now he can work as much or as little as he wants. I believe he’ll be doing this till they throw dirt in on him. He’s outlived a lot of his bandmates, and the mileage on that boy — hard miles. But look at his friends, fans, and family. They

have made as much of a difference in his life as he has made in theirs. They’ve always been there for him and always will. That is the true sign of success.”⁹³

Don Imus adds, “You can tell a lot about people by how they treat people behind the scenes. McClinton treats everyone well. He is a good person, outside of music. And he is intelligent, and has a great sense of humor, not just in his songs, but in conversation too. One time he was in the studio playing guitar on the show and I asked if I got a guitar, how long it would take me to learn to play like that. He said, ‘You don’t have enough time.’” Imus laughs and admits he was probably right.⁹⁴

Looking Toward the Future

On November 4, 2015, Delbert McClinton turned seventy-five. However, the multi-Grammy award winning singer, songwriter, and bandleader shows no signs of slowing down. Despite six decades of personal and professional obstacles, he has repeatedly re-emerged seemingly stronger and more successful than ever, continuing to tour, write, and record.

Of all the difficult years McClinton has survived, 2014 was one of the most challenging. In March, his son Clay (also a performing musician), was in a car accident and suffered a serious head injury. McClinton and Goldstein got the call at home in Nashville in the early morning hours from oldest son, Monty. Clay was in Intensive Care in Austin, so McClinton and Goldstein flew to Texas to stay by Clay’s side in the hospital for several weeks. McClinton says, “That’s when I met me. That’s when I met who I was, and life has changed a great deal since then.”⁹⁵

Once Clay began to show signs of improvement, McClinton headed out to Florida for one performance, after which he was planning to return to the Austin hospital to be with Clay. McClinton recalls, “We got to the venue. I thought I was having heartburn. It got worse. I knew something was not right. They called EMS. They checked me out and told me that I was okay now, but should probably go to the hospital and find out if I had a heart attack. I didn’t go with them but had the promoter take me to the hospital and found out that, yeah, I had a little ‘nudge,’ they called it. They did a heart cath the next day and found that I had 95% blockage in the main artery — a ‘Widow Maker,’ they call it.”⁹⁶

Today, Clay McClinton has almost completely recovered from his head injury and is performing again. “He’s grateful,” McClinton says. “His wife, Brandy, said, ‘Clay has really taken advantage of his second chance.’” The same can be said for Delbert McClinton, who has also made a full recovery. McClinton returned to the stage two months after his April

2014 heart surgery. “I was melancholy. I felt kicked out of my life for a while. I didn’t know if I could sing. I didn’t know if I could be me on stage,” he said, “but I found that I had so much more energy and more stamina. From 95% blockage to open road. It made a big difference.”⁹⁷

Don Imus agrees. “Delbert was always good, but he sings better now. He looks a lot better than he has in years. He doesn’t have bags under his eyes. He has energy. I think he is better than he ever was. He’ll go forever. Sinatra worked for a long time— what, into his late 80s? And still had that great voice. Tony Bennett is what, like 150? They still wheel him out there and he knocks them out every single time. Generations like Delbert. His music, his style; it’s ageless. All good art is. The song, ‘Dreams to Remember’ — my seventeen-year old son came up to me the other day and told me that Delbert was better than Otis Redding, who had the original version of ‘Dreams.’ He was great when he was twenty-two and playing harmonica with Bruce Channel, and he’s great now.”⁹⁸

Delbert McClinton is once again “back on top.” He is playing in major venues from New York to California and is planning his 22nd Annual Sandy Beaches Cruise in January 2016. He is also working on a new album and plans to have it ready for his year-long Diamond Jubilee Celebration. When discussing his songwriting style, McClinton explains what others have struggled to describe. “Call it blues or country rock, or American roots or whatever, but one of the most important things about my songs continues to be that there is always a way out. Nothing I write spirals into the abyss. It’s all ‘I’ll be all right.’ The music is mostly so positive, in that ‘I’ll be okay’... ‘and maybe if’... ‘I’m hoping that’... frame of mind ... I always want to have an uplifting draft in the breeze of the song.”⁹⁹

In a 1966 *Playboy* magazine interview with journalist Ron Rosenbaum, Bob Dylan said, “Popular songs are the only art form that describes the temper of the times. It’s more than live—its Alive. It’s not in museums or shelves in a library.”¹⁰⁰ Today, nearly fifty years after that Dylan interview, does McClinton believe that statement still rings true? “I think I am a voice of the people,” McClinton reflects. “My own stories and the experiences of others are, or could be, true. I write and sing about the problems, the dreams, the hopes of the everyday person. Bad grammar used properly is poetry. It is art, and it is what we sound like today. I write songs the way I am going to sing them. Phonetically. ‘Del-bonics,’” he adds.¹⁰¹

One might wonder whether McClinton has ever doubted his career and life choices? He says, “I have never been jaded about music. I have never ever wondered if I was doing the right thing. I have never doubted what I was doing, though I have not always been able to back that up. I am still a work in progress. I still have that hunger in there — that thing that has

always been there. It keeps me calm. I am not doing this for anybody else. I am playing and writing and singing for me. If I make me happy, I am doing what I need to be doing. And if I make other people feel good along the way, that’s the bonus.”¹⁰²

McClinton’s new album, scheduled for release in 2016, includes a song that reflects on his past while remaining optimistic about the future:

Hearts get broken every day
You can’t let that get in your way
Soon enough those tears will fade
Everything will be rosy.

Sometimes life gets so absurd.
The trick is learning how to handle the curve.
Get a grip, don’t lose your nerve.
Everything will be rosy.

There gonna be hard times, good times,
All along the way.
It really ain’t none of my business,
But I’m gonna tell you ’bout it anyway.

Don’t have the answer; nobody’s fool.
Listen up. I got news for you.
You gotta find a way to lose your blues,
And everything will be rosy.¹⁰³★

Discography

Delbert & Glen

<i>Delbert & Glen</i>	Clean Records	1972
<i>Subject to Change</i>	Clean Records	1973
<i>Blind, Crippled, and Crazy</i>	New West Records	2013

Delbert McClinton

<i>Victim of Life’s Circumstances</i>	ABC Records	1975
<i>Genuine Cowhide</i>	ABC Records	1976
<i>Love Rustler</i>	ABC Records	1977
<i>Second Wind</i>	Capricorn Records	1978
<i>Keeper of the Flame</i>	Capricorn Records	1979
<i>The Jealous Kind</i>	Capitol Records	1980
<i>Plain’ From the Heart</i>	Capitol Records	1981

<i>Wake Up Baby</i>	Accord	1981
<i>Feelin’ Alright</i>	Intermedia	1984
<i>Live From Austin</i>	Alligator Records	1989
<i>I’m With You</i>	Curb Records	1988
<i>Never Been Rocked Enough</i>	Curb Records	1992
<i>One of the Fortunate Few</i>	Rising Tide	1997

<i>Victim of Life’s Circumstances/</i>		
<i>Genuine Cowhide</i>	Raven Records	1997
<i>The Ultimate Collection</i>	Hip-O Records	1999
<i>Nothing Personal</i>	New West Records	2001
Room to Breathe	Blue Rose/New West	2002
Live	New West Records	2003
Cost of Living	New West Records	2005
Acquired Taste	New West Records	2009

Notes

- “One of the Fortunate Few,” by Delbert McClinton, Gary Nicholson, Al Anderson, and Tim Hambridge, Nasty Cat Music, BMI; The author would like to thank Natalie Cherwin at Hal Leonard Corporation for help in securing usage rights for the song lyrics included in this article.
- For more on this, see Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).
- Joe Nick Patoski, interview by the author, July 19, 2013.
- Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
- For an interesting look at how desegregation of the U.S. military, along with federal legislation and Supreme Court rulings, influenced the “desegregation” of San Antonio’s music scene, see Alex La Rotta, “‘Talk to Me’: The History of San Antonio’s West Side Sound,” *The Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 13, (2013), 8-39. Available online at: <http://www.txstate.edu/ctmh/publications/journal.html>
- Mark Kurlansky, *Ready for a Brand New Beat: How “Dancing in the Streets” became the Anthem for a Changing America* (New York: Penguin 2013), 1-4.
- McClinton, interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 8, 2015.
- Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 84.
- McClinton interview, July 8, 2015.
- Michael Hall, “Gotta Lubbock,” *Texas Monthly*, May 2002.
- McClinton interview, July 8, 2015.
- McClinton, telephone interview by Michael Hall, July 17, 2001. Wittliff Collections at Texas State University, SWWC Accession No. 2001-143 Folder 1.
- McClinton, interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 9, 2015.
- Ibid.; The Harley Sadler Tent Shows were secular traveling shows that included elements of medicine shows, theatre, music, and vaudeville. Long after they declined in popularity in larger cities, they continued to travel throughout rural Texas, until Sadler folded the tents and began a second career as a Texas legislator. For more on this, see Clifford Ashby and Suzanne Depauw May, *Trouping Through Texas: Harley Sadler and His Tent Show* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982).

- McClinton, interview by the author, Austin, Texas, April 24, 2015; The Wikipedia page for Arlington Heights High School in Fort Worth lists as one of its “Notable alumni: McClinton, Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter and musician.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arlington_Heights_High_School
- The most complete study of the border radio phenomenon is Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).
- McClinton interview, July 8, 2015; for more on Doug Sahm and his role in helping shape Texas music, see Travis Stimeling, “The Creation of “Texas Music’: Doug Sahm’s Atlantic Sessions and the Progressive Country Era,” *The Journal of Texas Music History*, Volume 12, 2012, 8-15. Available online at: <http://www.txstate.edu/ctmh/publications/journal.html>
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 8, 2015.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 8, 2015
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- McClinton interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 7, 2015.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Don Imus, telephone interview by the author, August 5, 2015.
- Gregg Andrews, interview by the author, San Marcos, Texas, July 31, 2015.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- Kathleen Hudson, *Telling Stories, Writing Songs: An Album of Texas Songwriters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 104-108.
- Andrews interview, July 31, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.

- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015; for more about the Texas Heritage Songwriters Hall of Fame, see: <http://www.texasheritagesongwriters.com/#aboutus>
- Gary Cartwright, “Twenty-Five Years of One Night Stands,” *Rolling Stone*, May 28, 1981, 33-34.
- Gary Cartwright, email correspondence with author, August 15, 2015.
- Michael McCall, *The Tennessean*, <http://www.tennessean.com/search/McClinton%20mcclinton/> (accessed July 6, 2015).
- Philip A. Lieberman, *Radio’s Morning Show Personalities: Early Hour Broadcasters and Deejays from the 1920s to the 1990s* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1996), 58.
- McClinton interview, July 8, 2015.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Martin Donell Kohout, “Major Bill Smith,” in Laurie Jasinski, ed., *The Handbook of Texas Music, Second Edition* (Denton: Texas State Historical Association, 2012), 561-562.
- KFJZ background and history: <https://www.fcc.gov/search/#q=KFJZ> (Accessed July 28, 2015)
- Kohout, “Major Bill Smith,” *Handbook of Texas Music*, 561-562.
- McClinton interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 10, 2015.
- Bruce Channel, interview by the author, Nashville, Tennessee, August 13, 2015.
- Channel interview, August 13, 2015; The Light Crust Doughboys, founded in 1931 by the Burrus Mill and Elevator Company in Fort Worth, had a successful touring career and popular radio show with alumni which included pioneering western swing bandleader, Bob Wills. As television eclipsed radio in popularity by the 1940s and 1950s, banjoist Marvin “Smokey” Montgomery kept the band active performing at variety shows, store openings, and community events; early in his career, Bruce Channel played music that appealed to a mainly teenage audience, including J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson’s hit “Chantilly Lace” and certain Elvis Presley songs.
- McClinton interview, July 10, 2015.
- Channel interview, August 13, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 10, 2015.
- Channel interview, August 13, 2015.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015. One night when they were not performing, McClinton and Channel went to a restaurant. They had just ordered their dinner when Channel saw something else on the menu that interested him. “Give me an order of that Yorkshire Pudding, too,” he said to the waiter. McClinton recalls that they ate all of their food, most of which they recognized but could not name, and were about finished when Channel asked, “Where’s that pudding?” to which the waiter politely replied, “You’ve just finished it, sir.”
- McClinton interview, July 7, 2015.
- Ibid. ; A few weeks after the J.F.K. assassination, McClinton arrived home to see an unfamiliar sedan parked in front of his house. It was the F.B.I., inquiring about his relationship with Jack Ruby, who had killed Lee Harvey Oswald. McClinton had no relationship with Ruby, other than having performed in some of Ruby’s clubs. The F.B.I. had found McClinton’s contact information in Ruby’s personal calendar from previous club bookings.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- Glen Clark, interview by the author, August 10, 2015 (The Texas Boys Choir, now known as the Texas Center for Arts and Academics, was

founded in 1946 by George Bragg. By 1958, when Glen Clark was a member, the group had traveled more than 50,000 miles throughout the United States and Mexico, performing choral music).

- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- McClinton interview, July 10, 2015.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- Delbert McClinton, “Two More Bottles of Wine,” Universal Music Publishing.
- Cartwright, “Twenty-Five Years of One Night Stands,” 34.
- Clark interview, August 10, 2015.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Richie Unterberger, AllMusic Online, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/McClinton-glen-mw0000138886> (accessed August 9, 2015).
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- Silas House, *No Depression Online*, “McClinton: Let the Good Times Roll” <http://nodepression.com/article/McClinton-mcclinton-let-good-times-roll> (accessed August 4, 2015).
- Wendy Goldstein, interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 9, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
- James Pennebaker, interview by the author, Nashville, Tennessee. August 14, 2015.
- McClinton interview, July 9, 2015.
- Goldstein interview, July 9, 2015.
- Joe Nick Patoski, album liner notes for *Honky Tonk ‘n Blues*, (Nashville: MCA 1994).
- Tosches, album liner notes for *One of the Fortunate Few*, (Nashville: Rising Tide 1997).
- Hudson, *Telling Stories*, 108.
- Kathleen Hudson, interview by the author, Fredericksburg, Texas, August 12, 2015.
- Imus interview, August 5, 2015.
- Clark interview, August 10, 2015.
- Imus interview, August 5, 2015.
- Gary Turlington, interview by the author, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, July 10, 2015.
- Pennebaker interview, August 14, 2015.
- Imus interview, August 5, 2015.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Imus interview, August 5, 2015.
- McClinton interview, April 24, 2015.
- Ron Rosenbaum, *Bob Dylan: 50 Years of the Playboy Interview* (Kindle Direct, Sept. 12, 2012), 7.
- McClinton interview, July 10, 2015.
- Ibid.
- “Everything Will Be Rosy,” by Delbert McClinton (2015) Nasty Cat Music, BMI.