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# THE COUNTRY SINGER WANTS TO DIE AND THAT'S WHAT I LIKE ABOUT HIM By Ace Boggs

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In the two years after my first local-band feature, I wrote a hundred stories for the Life page on rockers, rappers, punks, alternakids, jazz acts, orchestras, gospel groups, and even a barbershop quartet. National acts stopped by to chat or their managers called me up with quotes, but mostly I shined a spotlight on the wannabes, up-and-comers, small bands reaching for success. I wrote about the destined, and often the destined to disappear. In Pittsburgh, it didn't take long before I was better known around town than many of the bands I covered.

The editor filled my mailbox with letters and leaflets, cassettes and compact discs. I started slowly, doing a story every week. Then two, three, four. Next thing I knew, I turned in a piece and realized it was the tenth in an eight-day stretch. In that period, I'd only written four crime stories and taken one general-interest assignment. The music scene had become my primary job.

It was mostly an office gig at the time. I listened to demos and wrote reviews, found phone numbers to call for fifteen-minute interviews. I rarely attended shows or got up close and personal with a superstar. The Billy Ray Rose story changed all that.

Rose was the kind of guy not even sleazy, late-night barroom babes would sleep with were his songs not in heavy rotation on the radio. Just another one of country music's Billy Rays, he struck me as a typical backwoods heavy breather who caught a break. Receding hairline, fat jaw with diminished chin, gold fillings in tobacco-yellowed teeth. He dressed in straw cowboy hats, fake leather boots that glistened like plastic, unfaded jeans in the deepest shades of blues and blacks.

Billy Ray Rose wore the term 'redneck' as if it were his given name. 'Hick,' to him, was a synonym for 'friend.' He could've stepped straight out of a coal mine or a hole-in-the-wall after-hours juke joint in some tiny, isolated Appalachian town. Instead, he came from about three hours south of here: Charleston, West Virginia--not a giant city, but that state's largest. The way I understand it, he made perfect grades all the way through school until his senior year when he slid to the middle of his class. At nineteen, he headed north to Morgantown, about an hour or so from Pittsburgh. He attended West Virginia University, majored in physics, minored in classical music, and completed three years before being kicked out --or so the story goes--for racial slurs in class. At twenty-one, Rose moved to Pittsburgh and formed his first band: Sparky Plugs. The name soon changed to Big Red Bug Guard, and finally to Billy Ray Rose and the Reds. He was the star of the band, after all--or so HE said. Rose's group played dives and pool halls throughout eastern Pennsylvania, hitting every hole-in-the-wall town his drummer-slash-manager could find on a map. That helped Rose build his reputation some, but he didn't need much buildup around

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here. In Pittsburgh's lifeless country music scene, that band was a happening act.

Billy Ray got his break when a friend of a friend of a friend's cousin got in touch with an old girlfriend who happened to be a producer in Nashville. She came to town at her ex-lover's request, caught Rose on stage, and fell in love with his sound. She signed him right off and flew him to Nashville, leaving the band behind. She liked Rose. The Reds weren't that lucky.

Soon after, Rose recorded his first album, "Too Young To Give Up Drinking, Too Old To Forget." It had one original song and nine by young writers with no future in the business--that is, aside from raking in some of the cash that Billy Ray made. Rose took borrowed songs and made them hits. His back-up performers over-performed, his producers overproduced, and his marketing team over-marketed him and his record until, within a year of moving to Nashville and by age twenty-four, Billy Ray Rose was a name known to almost every country music fan in the U.S. His album sold five million copies, and his first single, "Even Bartenders Cry," went platinum almost overnight. He made a video for that goddamn annoying song which set records for requests. Then he went on his first national tour, opening for one of country music's other famous Billy Rays. After two more singles, "Lost Love, Where Are You?" and "Someone Stole A Page From My Little Black Book," he headlined small venues, relying on his name to sell out shows.

Billy Ray Rose became a superstar. That's what I know about him. It's what he is--or was--to millions of fans. It's not what he is to me. Not even close. No, to me he's a bad guy who made my life a little better just by being his usual annoying self. He's an interview that made me famous in Pittsburgh. Or infamous. But like said, to me he's just another one of country music's Billy Rays.

I met him at the peak of his fame, days before he released his second record, the flop that stalled his career. Rose had a sold-out Monday night gig at Star Lake, with the new disc due in stores the following day. For publicity, old Billy Ray had to suck up to hacks like me. Problem was, Rose wasn't very good at sucking up. In fact, he'd been an ass to reporters several times of the last couple years. He challenged one reviewer to a fist fight, and he once asked a critic "Why's a black guy cover country music in the first place? Don't know enough boutcha own music?" My interview wasn't quite that bad. Still, he had a way of getting under my skin.

It was Friday evening that found me working in the newsroom. I sat at my computer, mostly reading the day's wire copy about crazed rock'n'roll singers being arrested, getting in fights, causing riots, or whatever it was they'd done that day to keep their piece of the ever-shrinking attention span of the average American teenage compact disc buyer.

That's when Arnie waddled over from the city desk, skin sagging from age and a newspaper man's hard life--like it was back in his day, anyway. He wore the most bedazzled look on his face. It was like he'd seen Death across the street slipping coins into a parking meter. "Collin," he said

"Yeah"

"Do you. . . ?"

"Uh huh?"

"Do you know. . . ?"

"What is it, Arnie? Spit it out, Man!"

"Do you know who Billy Ray Rose is?"

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"Billy Ray Rose," I said. "Country singer. Real dumbass. Got those annoying songs that make canaries kill themselves. What was it? 'Bartenders Cry In Their Beer' or something?"

"Yeah, something."

"Why, Arnie? What's up?"

Arnie twitched, a little unsure of himself.

"Come on. I've got work to do." It was a lie.

"He's on line three."

"You're shitting me!"

"No. He's on line three. Wants to talk to our music critic."

"He wants to talk to the. . . ?"

"Music critic."

"We don't have a music critic," I said.

"That was my reaction at first. Then I thought, well, that's sort of you. I mean, ain't it?"

"Oh, thanks," I told him, heavy on the sarcasm.

"It's your area," he said.

"I know, I know. Line three, you say?"

"Line three," he said.

"I'm on it."

"Thanks." He slapped me on the back as if we were old pals.

I put aside what I was doing, grabbed a pen and a clean notebook, and reached for the phone. "Domestic-Chronicle," I said instinctively. "May I help you?"

"Buddy," said the phlegm-filled voice, "who am I talking to?"

"Collin Hearst. What can I do for you?"

"Well, hell," he said. "This is Billy Ray Rose callin'. Get it? Billy Ray Rose callin'? Collin, callin'. See?" Then he coughed, or blew his nose, or something crude disguised as a laugh.

"What can I do for you, Mister Rose?"

"What you can do's get up off your ass and get over here'n get this interview done with." He pronounced it innerview.

"Interview?" I said, annunciating the word just to be rude. "What interview?"

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"You're supposed to interview me about Monday," he said.

"Don't know what you mean. When was it scheduled?"

"Right now," he demanded. "I'm scheduling it right now. Get here. I'll have security let you in the back way."

"That's short notice. I'm not sure I can. . . ."

"Won't take no for an answer, Buddy Boy. You get here. Right away." The bastard hung up before I could get more than a breath out in reply.

"Fuck," I said.

Jilly--the staff photographer I took with me--skittered around the room, completely speechless as she shot the pictures. I guess she was a Billy Ray Rose fan. Who knew? Even so, I think Rose intimidated her. If not him, then maybe his reputation. He wasn't known for being nice to women. Or anybody else for that matter, now that I think about it.

"What makes you special?" I asked, challenging him, trying to seem tough--a hard-edged journalist rather than a feature writer who loved bands and free booze.

I almost expected him to lose his country cool. Instead, he answered with a somewhat despondent tone. "I'm not special," he said. "I'm successful."

"How do you mean?"

"Listen, Buddy Boy, anybody can be successful. Practice, hard work, a little luck--they all lead that way eventually. I mean, if you stick with it. Garth Brooks, Charlie Daniels--they's just plain successful. Worked the circuits, did what they had to do, put their whole lives on hold for the music and, you know, to build their careers. Seems to me they got what they wanted. They earned it, you know? But, Buddy Boy, then there's fellows like Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash. They's the ones I call special. Hank Junior, he's successful. Hank Senior, now that man was real special. Right? You get what I'm telling you? See the difference?"

"I think so," I said. I hated to admit it, but I silently agreed with his logic.

"I want to die successful," he went on. "I want to die dead certain I put all of what little I got into making my music. You got that?"

I nodded, a voice in my head joking, "So, he wants to die successful, eh? Fair enough. Sounds like a good deal. Why don't we get on with it?"

"That's good, 'cause a distinction needs made. Billy Ray Rose is successful. Billy Ray Rose ain't special." For the briefest moment, I accepted his humility as a sign that an actual person existed inside the crude shell of a man. But he had to keep talking . . . the dumb bastard. "What the hell. I never wanted to be special. I just wanted to pick up chicks. Heh heh. Now I'm famous, I got first pick of the litter any time I want. Shit, yeah. If that's the payday, I'd take being successful any day."

By editorial consensus, that last part of Rose's tirade got omitted. It didn't find its way into print despite my argument for burning him at the stake by showing off the real Billy Ray Rose to the world. Of course, I was still young then, and kind of naive. The world already understood the real Billy Ray Rose. At that point, folks didn't care.

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What mattered was what folks wanted him to be. Everybody had their expectations.

In a way, those expectations are why the interview made me a celebrity for a while. I asked him typical questions, and he answered typically. But then I asked the most basic question in a reporter's arsenal, the easiest softball pitch for him to smack out of the park, and one with no malice whatsoever implied or, as far as I could imagine, even possible. I said, "Tell me, Mister Rose, where do you think you'll be ten years from now."

"I'll have sold ten million each of ten records, with ten million left in a bank account to show for it. I'll lounge around my heated swimming pool nearly naked, with a girls scattered everywhere, you know, fulfilling whatever fantasies I have left. I'll be lean and tan, with bulging biceps and triceps and them other muscles. I'll be head-to-toe perfect, by God, and the best-selling artist of all times. I won't be able to leave my house without fighting back an army."

The editors wouldn't let me use any of that either. I had a feeling they wouldn't, but I wrote it down anyway and went on to the follow-up question: "So, you think your fame will keep growing?"

"Buddy Boy," he replied, "come ten years, I'll be more famous than God."

Reminded of similar words on the statue of Ozymandias, I inscribed Rose's quote at the base of my article, and the editors for some reason didn't edit it out. I like to think their eyes were tired after all the other bad shit Rose said that they found and decided to cut.

Anyway, that story made me news for a while. Several reporters from major newspapers and magazines called me at work to make sure I'd gotten Rose's quote right before they ran it, knowing the impact it would have. I told them the truth: I left out the words 'Buddy Boy' as on all my Rose quotes so I didn't lose six full inches of copy. That satisfied them, though none of them found it nearly as funny as I did.

I won't say it's that quote that began Rose's downfall. He'd already made enemies. After all, he'd let his mouth drive from day one, but he never bothered to teach it to read the STOP signs and speed limits. Personally, I think he should've put it in park just that one time. There are some things not even a successful man can say.

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**Ace Boggess** is author two novels, *Displaced Hours* (2004) and *Beautiful Ambivalence* (2006) available from Gatto Publishing ([gattopublishing.com](http://gattopublishing.com)), *The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled*, a book of poems (Highwire Press: 2003); and, as editor, the anthology *Wild Sweet Notes II: More Great Poetry from West Virginia*. His songs are available for free download at [music.download.com/aceboggess](http://music.download.com/aceboggess). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Florida Review*, and many other journals. His story in this issue is from his unpublished novel, *A Song without a Melody*.

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