

# The country boogie-woogie of Sleepy LaBeef

David Walsh  
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The recent appearance by Sleepy LaBeef at the Magic Bag in Ferndale, Michigan, confirms his status as one of the greatest living performers of American popular music. It is hard to imagine anyone surpassing LaBeef in honesty, enthusiasm and intensity. All this accomplished at the age of 61, after 40 years as a professional musician.

Over the course of a two-and-half hour show, LaBeef tore through a sampling of his reputed repertoire of 6,000 songs, including George Jones's "I'm ragged but I'm right", Bob Wills's "Faded love", Ernest Tubbs's "Waltz across Texas", Hank Williams's "Jambalaya", Merle Travis's "Sixteen tons", Hank Ballard's "Tore Up", Johnny Horton's "I'm coming home", Nancy Sinatra's "These boots are made for walking", Clarence 'Frogman' Henry's "I ain't got no home", Chuck Berry's "Monkey business", Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill", the traditional Columbia stockade, "Little old wine drinker me" (a top 10 hit for Robert Mitchum!) and Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee". By the time he blasted out "Mystery Train" a little before midnight, the band and audience appeared to be fading slightly; LaBeef, so it seemed, was just getting started.

Sleepy LaBeef was born Thomas Pauley LaBeff, the youngest of 10 children, on a small farm near the town of Smackover in southern Arkansas. The music he heard in church was a major influence on his development. Furthermore, this was post-war America. Radio stations from all over beamed a variety of sounds into his fortunately-situated region.

As he has explained: "I could catch the 'Louisiana Hayride' [country music program] out of Shreveport, and the Grand Ole Opry out of Nashville, and blues programs out of Chicago, Little Rock, New Orleans. You'd hear hillbilly, Hank Williams, you'd hear blues

singers, you'd hear Bob Wills's [Western swing] band, and Lucky Millinder with Sister Rosetta Tharpe [a black gospel singer] ... and you'd hear Red Foley, and bluegrass, and the radio hits of the day."

A single performance by Sleepy LaBeef goes a long way towards dissolving the largely artificial barriers erected between "black" and "white" music in America. LaBeef, because it suits his musical and emotional purposes, will transform a blues into a country song, bluegrass or country numbers into pounding rock and roll, hillbilly into rhythm and blues.

Like any great performer, LaBeef treats the various songs he sings as so many opportunities to explore human joy and sorrow. To that end he adopts many guises: carouser, preacher, suitor, jilted lover, repentant and unrepentant sinner, laborer, country boy, city slicker.

The singer can put himself in anyone's shoes, because he feels and thinks deeply about people. LaBeef, who now lives in Massachusetts, tours the US and Europe most of the year. He has never made a lot of money. Is it any wonder that 'Frogman' Henry's classic "Ain't got no home" is virtually a theme song?:

"I got a voice/and I love to sing/I can sing like a girl/and I can sing like a frog/I'm a lonely boy/I ain't got a home."

In performance, Sleepy LaBeef plays batches of songs in sets lasting 20 minutes or more. Songs whose titles are shouted out by audience members are seamlessly woven, nearly instantaneously, into these medleys.

One might say that he is engaged in the business of performing one extended piece, interrupted by those inevitable periods of time between shows, for the rest of his life—the translation of his experience of the world into music.

LaBeef shifts from tune to tune, genre to genre and mood to mood, sometimes after no more than a verse or

two of a particular number, with a barely visible nod of the head to the rest of his band. In this improvisational, free-form approach to popular music he reminds one of a great jazz player, taking off from a standard into the stratosphere. It can't be accidental that the phrase "boogie-woogie" crops up in LaBeef's music continually. This is music that jumps and throbs.

To grasp how exceptional Sleepy LaBeef is, one need only consider the fate of those who entered country music and rock and roll at the same time as he. Most, if not all, have fallen by the wayside. Some, not attaining the level of financial success they sought, simply hung up their instruments. Some surrendered to money and corruption. Still others, to still the anxiety or pain, turned to drugs and drink, perhaps finding relief in an early death.

Somehow LaBeef has retained the purity of the emotions he must have experienced when he got away from the farm at the age of 18, moved to Houston and began to make money doing the one thing he loved more than any other.

A debate rages among LaBeef's admirers as to why the singer has never become a major star. A variety of factors, some of them arbitrary, no doubt come into play. Conventional wisdom has it as well that LaBeef's recordings have never matched his live performances. This is largely true. One can only really appreciate Sleepy LaBeef in person; his is a musical personality ignited by audience response. However, his recordings—whether the recent Rounder CDs or the six-CD Bear Family collected early works—are certainly worth listening to. Virtually every one contains at least a gem or two.

In the final analysis, the debate over LaBeef's failure to achieve stardom is a sterile one. In America musical success is still measured in hit records and the size of one's bank account. To watch and hear Sleepy LaBeef is to gain an appreciation of what is best in the American character—optimism, boundless energy, the willingness to share one's pleasure and feel another's pain. Is Sleepy LaBeef a success? His is the only success that counts for anything.



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