

Music should not be a selfish thing

An interview with Sleepy LaBeef

David Walsh

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Sleepy LaBeef is as gracious in an interview as he is generous in performance. After the show I asked him:

David Walsh: What keeps you so passionate about the music after all these years?

Sleepy LaBeef: Well, I've always loved it, I love it; it gets better and better.

This show was more intense than the one I saw a few years ago.

SL: Well, you're supposed to get better with age, I think. The enthusiasm has always been there. And so the more you learn, the more you do, the greater thrill it is. Music to me, if you feel it, is not like something you get tired of, like a hobby. It's part of breathing, it's part of living.

It's a way to transfer emotions, for yourself, and for what many of the people in your audience might feel. That's the way I feel about it. I think music should not be a selfish thing. It should be given and the audience gives back by responding.

DW: Why is that enthusiasm so rare today?

SL: I think many people don't get the exposure to the variety. I grew up in south Arkansas, we had a forty-acre farm, until my dad got tired of farming, things weren't happening so good, so he went to work in the oil field.

We listened to radio stations. We listened to the blues, we listened to country, Western Swing out of Texas, bluegrass from Kentucky. So I got an exposure to many types of music and that's where my appreciation comes from. I couldn't name one direction. You say, "Well, are you country?" Yeah, I'm very much country. But I like rock 'n' roll, I like blues, bluegrass, hillbilly, gospel music all of them. I think it takes it all to be complete.

DW: Who were some of the people you played with in the '50s?

SL: Well, in the '50s I was fortunate enough to be on many of the shows. There were several of us starting out of Houston. There was George Jones, Tommy Sands, Sonny Burns; Roy Orbison was on a lot of those old shows.

We would go in and open the show, for Elvis. We'd just kill an hour, of course we had fun doing it. We'd get to do maybe three or four songs each. And then, the main attraction, Elvis, would come on. But I had the opportunity to play with all sorts of people when the music began to get hot back then. I worked shows with Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry. We still do some with Chuck across the country.

DW: You said before that music shouldn't be selfish.

SL: It should be given. By giving, you receive. Just like tonight, I didn't want to quit. No matter what I did, they loved it, a great audience, and by responding, you don't want to quit. But then there comes a time, like the boys in the band have told me a few times, "We're going to quit watching the clock, and put up a calendar."

DW: How planned out is the program before you start?

SL: Not a bit. Usually I start out many of my shows with Strange Things Happening [by Rosetta Tharpe], because that's one of my favorites. After that, it's every man for himself. Just grab a hold.

But the boys do good. The piano player, he's from England, but he's been with me for 10 years. The drummer's been with me maybe a year and a half. The bass player, he works between me and Chuck Berry and Charlie Feathers.

DW: What do you think of the music scene in general these days?

SL: Well, I like what I'm doing better. I like the idea of country, rock, blues, all of it mixed into one pot. I

hear some good things. I hear “New Country,” but sometimes I think it’s not so new. It’s just dressed up with a different suit. A lot of it is the country rock we’ve been doing for years. They dress it up a little, maybe wrap some more instrumentation around it, disguise it a little.

Our records do pretty well, but I don’t think by any means we’re competing with Nashville yet.

DW: That’s just as well, don’t you think?

SL: I probably enjoy it more than they do. I get paid a little bit for it, but like I said the other day, we felt so good and enjoyed it so much that we should have paid the people.

DW: How long would you like to keep doing this?

SL: Oh, probably about another 20 years, then slow down a little bit.

DW: And you go to Europe regularly.

SL: Yeah, I just got back. Finland, France, Sweden.

DW: How was it there?

SL: It was great. And I’m going to Spain in about three or four weeks. We have about another week and a half on tour. Then go home, rest for a bit.

DW: Maybe you’ll inspire a new generation.

SL: I notice this. I see some of the younger kids you’d think wouldn’t care what we’re doing. They get all wrapped up in it now.

Many places where they serve alcohol the young kids can’t get in. We do outdoor parks, where they have picnic areas, all these kids get out there and get into it. They can feel it, they might not always understand what we’re doing, what somebody there with a cowboy hat is rocking and rolling for, but they can feel that beat.



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