In the early months of 1964, on their inaugural tour of North America, the Beatles seemed to be everywhere: appearing on The Ed Sullivan Show, making the front cover of Newsweek, and playing for fanatical crowds at sold out concerts in Washington, D.C. and New York City. On Billboard magazine’s April 4, 1964, Hot 100 list, the “Fab Four” held the top five positions. One notch down at Number 6 was “Suspicion,” by a virtually unknown singer from Amarillo, Texas, named Terry Stafford. The following week “Suspicion” – a song that sounded suspiciously like Elvis Presley using an alias – moved up to Number 3, wedged in between the Beatles’ “Twist and Shout” and “She Loves You.” The saga of how a Texas boy met the British Invasion head-on, achieving almost overnight success and a Top-10 hit, is one of triumph and disappointment, a reminder of the vagaries that are a fact of life when pursuing a career in music. It is also the story of Stafford’s continuing development as a gifted songwriter, a fact too often overlooked when assessing his career.
Terry La Verne Stafford was born on November 22, 1941, in Hollis, Harmon County, Oklahoma, in the southwestern corner of the state. He was seven years old when the family moved west to Amarillo, where he grew up on the wind-swept plains of the Texas Panhandle. The 6-foot 3-inch Stafford excelled in sports, starring in both baseball and basketball at Palo Duro High School, before graduating in 1960. Music was an important part of Stafford's life, too. In a 1980 interview with Robert Dalley for Goldmine magazine, he recalled, "My dad played a little guitar, so I was always trying to play and sing as a kid." He made his singing debut when he was only ten years old singing at the local Moose hall. I sang a couple of Hank Williams tunes, 'Your Cheatin' Heart' and 'You Win Again.' Later on I joined a country band whose lead singer was my cousin, Ed Bevan. For the next two years, Stafford moved back and forth from California to Texas before deciding to remain in Los Angeles, where he began competing in talent shows at such venues as the El Monte Legion Stadium. His cousin managed the Lively Ones, a surf group under contract to Del-Fi Records. Oftentimes the band invited Stafford on stage to sing at their dances, and this led to an opportunity to make a demo tape in 1962. As Stafford explained, "The Lively Ones were recording at the Sound House Studios in El Monte with Bob Summers. I decided that I would like to record at the Sound House, so I picked a tune off of an Elvis Presley album, called 'Suspicion.' Bob Summers played all the instruments except bass. ... We took the tape around to all the major labels in town ... but they all turned it down." Along the way, Gene Weed, a disc jockey at KFWB (980 AM) and a fellow Texas expat, heard the tape and contacted Herb Alpert at A&M Records. Although Stafford did cut two songs for A&M – "You Left Me Here to Cry" b/w (backed with) "Heartaches on the Way" (A&M 707) – Alpert passed on "Suspicion." A year later Stafford's cousin, Ted Bevan, who was now his manager, sent the tape on to John Fisher, president of newly launched Crusader Records. Stafford resumes his account, "John Fisher liked it and he did some remicxing and mastering and promised to have it out by January, 1964. ... 'Suspicion' seemed built to showcase every little vocal trick in the world, but it's an organ. "Ev-ry time you kiss me / I'm still not certain that you love me / Ev-ry time you hold me / I'm still not certain that you care." The singer is unable to overcome his doubt, his suspicion. "Though you keep on saying / You really, really, really love me / Do you speak the same words / To someone else when I'm not there?" Is the singer's disgust getting the better of him or is there truly cause for the persistent dread? The listener is left to decide. Suspicion torments my heart / Suspicion keeps us apart / Suspicion why torture me!" Much has been made of Stafford's 'sound-like Elvis' way of singing, and he is often categorized as a Presley imitator, just another one of the "Elvoids." Over the years, Stafford gracefully acknowledged the influence and similarities. "I have always been a big fan of Elvis' ever since I heard his first record. I spent a lot of time listening to his records so I might have picked up some of his phrasing." However, as his subsequent career proves, Stafford was far more than a mere Presley clone. If Terry Stafford's vocals are what first catch the listener's attention, it is the sound that Bob Summers achieves in the production that gives "Suspicion" much of its singular appeal. When Stafford recorded the demo, Summers chose to center the melody around a reoccurring organ riff or refrain, what one observer called a "quirky flourish ... the rinky-dink keyboard that plays throughout." According to John Fisher, placing a paper bag over the organ's Leslie speaker further enhanced the distinctive accompaniment. In addition, on the final mix for the commercial release, a vocal chorus with prominent female voices echoes sympathetically, intertwining with Stafford's sleek delivery. Combine all of this with the paranoid mood of the Pomus breakup suite, and the result is a pop masterpiece. The song has twice made Top-40 success on Billboard's country chart: in 1972 for Bobby G. Rice (Royal American 48) and in 1988 for Ronnie McDowell (Carib 15900). In 2009, Bob Summers, again playing most of the instruments, produced Ed Greenwald's "Suspicion" (BSM Sounds), which was intended as part of an iTunes download tribute to Stafford.

Terry Stafford's recording of "Suspicion" entered Billboard's Hot 100 list on February 22, 1964, and began a steady ascent. By March 28, it reached Number 9, poised to break the Beatles strangled hold on the Top 5. The song remained in the Top 10 for seven consecutive weeks. Stafford received an invitation to appear on Dick Clark's American Bandstand on March 28, 1964, to sing (lip-synch) his hit record. During the requisite interview afterwards, Stafford was modest, self-effacing, and looking a bit uncomfortable still getting used to the national exposure. Like many, Dick Clark was intrigued by the "sound" of the record, and he inquired, "May I ask how you got that peculiar sound in the background? Is there any particular instrumentation that caused it to sound the way it does?" "It's an organ," Stafford explained. "Sounds like muted trumpets to me, but it's an organ." Two weeks after lip-synching to "Suspicion" on American Bandstand, Stafford made his first public appearance on the East Coast at the Paramount Theater in New York City as part of the "Good Guys" show sponsored by radio station WMCA (570 AM). Others on the bill were Sam Cooke, the Four Seasons, Ruby and the Romantics, and Lesley Gore. The various package shows afforded Stafford the chance to rub shoulders with some of his favorites. "Muhammad Ali [then Cassius Clay] had a record out at the time, and he would come backstage...
Back in Los Angeles, John Fisher assembled eleven recently recorded Stafford tracks along with the hit record for an album, not surprisingly titled *Suspicion!* (Crusader CLP-1001). Bob Summers handled the arranger's duties, and disc jockey Gene Weed was on board to write the liner notes. “Suspicion” is defined as “an inking or hint” and that is what Terry's recording has been for you, only a hint of what to be found on this album. Crusader Records placed an ad in *Billboard* announcing the release of *Suspicion!* First artist to break the Beatles barrier! Terry Stafford's first album and it's a winner. An exciting album containing the smash single *Suspicion*!

James Brown and Roger Miller. … I enjoyed seeing them all with their entourage; it was all very exciting. I was working with the legends of the music business, people like Jerry Lee Lewis, James Brown and Roger Miller.

London Records picked up the option to release Stafford's version in the U.K., and “Suspicion” circulated worldwide. The recording has been for you, only a hint of what is to be found on the soundtrack of the drive-in snoozer is the sequel to *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Bobs* (Warner Brothers Records, 1966). The soundtrack of the drive-in snoozer is the sequel to *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Bobs* (Warner Brothers Records, 1966). The third one proved to be elusive. Even though the Billboard review gave “Follow the Rainbows” (Crusader C-109) a thumbs-up — another relaxing sound from young Stafford. Sounds like this could be his third hit in a row — it and a fourth Crusader single, “Hoping” b/w “A Little Bit Better” (Crusader C-110), went nowhere. The popularity of “Suspicion” persisted, though, and Stafford was on the road during the summer and fall of 1966, touring the United States and Canada. In November, Stafford, along with Dot recording artist Jimmie Rodgers and one of Phil Spector's girl groups, Mel Shauer next took his client to Sidewalk Productions, the company founded in 1964 by twenty-year-old Mike Curb, the youthful impresario who would go on to form his own group, the Mike Curb Congregation, become president of MGM Records and later Curb Records, and serve as governor of California. The ubiquitous Bob Summers was Curb's associate at Sidewalk, and when the two began producing movie soundtracks for American International Pictures, Summers enlisted Stafford's participation.

Stafford supervised Stan Lee Black's revival of a couple of oldies, “Be Bop a Lula” and “Raining in My Heart” (Alamo International 223). "Le Spic Vergine dal Semifreddo" on Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Bobs (Tower T 5035) became the first soundtrack album on which Stafford was involved. Filmled in Italy and starring Vincent Price as the mad scientist, Dr. Goldfoot, the 1966 drive-in snoozer is the sequel to *Dr. Goldfoot and the Bikini Bobs,* Stafford's *Try My World Little Girl* with that distinctive organ sound, this time spotlighted in a dodging psychedelic instrumental break, could well be an outtake from Crusader Records. Curb and Summers included Stafford singing two selections — “Forgive Me” and “Alone Never to Love Again” — on the soundtrack of *Born Losers* (Tower T 5082). This is the movie that introduced Tom Laughlin as “Billy Jack” buttling a motorcycle gang in a small California town. “Forgive Me” plays in the background of the pool hall scene when the sheriff confronts the gang.

In 1969, Wild Wheels, Stafford also made his big screen acting debut as “Huey”, a dune buggy-riding surfer whose club tangles with a motorcycle pack. *Shot* on Piston Beach, Wild Wheels starred Don Epperson as a small-time surfer and actor held by the prominent Bob Summers for Sidewalk Productions pitched two of Terry's compositions to Warner Brothers Records, and the company agreed to release a single, “Big in Dallas” b/w “Will a Man Ever Learn” (Warner Brothers 7286), that showcases both Stafford's versatility as a singer and songwriter: “Will a Man Ever Learn” is a brooding plea — “I've been crying, girl, over you / 'Cause you've been lying, girl, / And I'm still in love with you / Now it looks like man would leave / With organ and horns (sax and trumpet), Stafford, his voice sliding into falsetto at times, gives a raw, gritty performance worthy of soul man Otis Redding. In contrast, and accompanied by a string section, “Big in Dallas” is a restrained, matter-of-fact account of an aspiring singer's attempts to make a go of it in the big city. The young man's mother begs him not to go, but he is determined “to make it big in Dallas.” He anticipates his name "up in lights" and standing ovations from audiences. Months later, after playing honky-tonks and dirty bars, the wannabe star is forced to admit, “I haven't gone too far in Dallas.” His faith “is almost gone,” but his dreams persist. “And tonight while I'm sleeping / I'll make it big in Dallas.”

Stafford succinctly summarized the initial impact of the record. "It wasn't out and didn't make any noise. But Buck Owens heard "[Big in Dallas]" somewhere and liked it.” Owens continues the story, "I was in Dallas doing a tour, and..."
and I heard a song called ‘Big in Dallas’ [on the radio]…. At the time, I was playing Las Vegas a lot and I thought, boy, I sure like that song. I wonder if I could change it around a little bit and call it ‘Big in Vegas’ cause, you know, you make it big in Dallas – that of course is nice, too – but people think if you’ve made it big in Vegas, you’ve really made it.55 Owens contacted Stafford asking if he could do a little re-writing, along with the title change, and Stafford agreed.56 Owens shortened the song from three verses to two, omitting several lines, but the sense of stoic acceptance is unaltered.

“Tune-in, turn-on California dancer / Smoked a hole in her hopes.” Sitting alone in a rundown hotel, she ponders her fate, even as the singer concludes the song on a mantra-like vibe. “She’s gonna make it / She’s gonna make it.” It worked out well for him because I’m sure it paid the rent money and takes a job at a go-go club waiting for “a big break to come along.” She falls in with the wrong crowd, alcohol and drugs readily available. “Tune-in, turn-on California dancer / Smoked a hole in her hopes.” It proved to be yet another album project for naught. The two MGM 45s — “Mean Woman Blues-Candy Man” b/w “Chilly Chicago” (MGM K 14213) and “California Dancer” b/w “The Walk” (MGM K 14271) — did not chart either, but three of the four songs were Stafford compositions. “The Walk” is a gospel-infused number that follows Jesus and his ministry. “Nobody living today was there when he walked by the sea / But everybody knows that he walked for you and me.” “California Dancer” is the standout, offering further evidence of Stafford’s growth as a songwriter.

“California Dancer” continues the theme Stafford explored in “Big in Dallas.” Follow your dreams, no matter what the obstacles. Persevere and the opportunity you need to succeed will surely follow. In “California Dancer,” a young woman becomes a professional dancer. “California dancer, she’s gonna make it all the way to the top / California dancer, until she does the girl won’t stop.” Our heroine runs out of money and takes a job at a go-go club waiting for “a big break to come along.” She falls in with the wrong crowd, alcohol and drugs readily available. “Tune-in, turn-on California dancer / Smoked a hole in her hopes.” S...
It is kind of funny, the song that had so much to do with bringing the Texas sound back was written by a couple of old rockers and inspired by a commercial.

"A-side treatment" to "Amarillo by Morning" owing to "heavy radio response." In addition, Cash Box reported that, unknown to the company, Jim Christofferson, the program director at Amarillo's, KJIV (1300 AM), had flown the platter over and begun promoting the "Amarillo" side; moreover, local residents were so taken with the song that there was a "movement" to declare it the official city anthem. Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame member Dugg Collins, who became a close friend of Stafford, was also on the staff at KJIV. "Well, I can tell you the 'A' side of that record ['Sweet Gypsy Rose'] never saw the light of day with me and my radio station," Collins affirmed. "'Amarillo by Morning' premiered December 1, 1973, on Billboard's Hot Country Singles, staying on the chart for fourteen weeks and reaching Number 11.

George Strait's version, first released in 1982 on his second album, Strait From the Heart (MCA 5320), continues to receive the most widespread public recognition. Stafford and Fraser garnered a 1984 BMI Citation of Achievement award on the basis of broadcast performances of Strait's recording. In 2003, CMT (Country Music Television) solicited the voting members of the Country Music Association to select the "100 greatest songs of country music," George Strait's version of "Amarillo by Morning" occupied the Number 12 slot. Bill Frakes-Warren and David Cannell ranked the song at 89 in Heartaches by the Number: Country Music's 500 Greatest Singles. At the Country Music Association awards on November 6, 2013, with Strait sitting in the front row, hosts Brad Paisley and Carrie Underwood sang an "Amarillo by Morning" parody, "Obamacare by Morning," much to the amusement of the audience with Paisley acknowledging Strait's presence. "By the way, thank you, George Strait, I always loved ['Amarillo by Morning']."

However, two years after Stafford's 1973 Atlantic debut, and seven years before Strait's recording, an actual rodeo cowboy was next out of the chute to record "Amarillo by Morning," Bareback-bronc riding champion Chris LeDoux included the song on his second self-released album, Songs of His Life As a Rodeo Man (Lucky Man 6520). LeDoux sold his records and 8-track tapes via mail order and off the tailgate of his truck at arenas where he competed, further ensuring the song a musical niche within the rodeo and cowboy subculture. In addition, prior to Strait's hit, several Texas performers had already found the song to their liking: Charlie Russell (1976), Terry Bullard (1980, produced by John Fisher), and Kelly Schoppa (1981).


"Amarillo by Morning" resonates in other media, as well. Filmmaker Spike Jonze entitled his 1998 short Amorillo by Morning. Shot during a rodeo in the Houston Astrodome, Jonze focuses his camera on a couple of would-be hopefuls aspiring to join the circuit. Screenwriter-producer-director Glen Stephen's novel, Amarillo by Morning, follows former world champion bull rider Richard "Stick" Slaton, who after twenty years on the sidelines attempts a comeback to earn enough money to pay for a kidney operation to save his nephew's life. Contemporary romance novelists also have a sweet spot for the scenario. Bay Matthews, Bethany Campbell, and Jodi Thomas have each published an Amorillo by Morning. Capitalizing on the positive response to "Amarillo by Morning" and "Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose," Atlantic Records released another two tunes from the Sweet Gypsy Rose album. "Captured," backed with a Stafford original, "It Sure Is Bad to Love Her" (Atlantic 4015), peaked at Number 24 on Billboard's Hot Country Singles on May 24, 1974.

Stafford reunited with Johnny Fortune, an associate from his Crusader Records days, and he used Fortune's band to begin touring again. These public appearances received approving notices, too. Billboard columnist Bob Kirk, who was in the audience at the Palomino Club in L.A., stated that "Terry Stafford is back as a country singer and, given a chance to do his own material, quite a commendable one... Stafford's performance here was quite successful and he had little trouble winning over the Palomino crowd. With some material to call his own, he should have no difficulty retaining a solid foothold in the country field." Stafford also secured an April 1974 booking to appear in the U.K at the 6th International Festival of Country Music at Wembley Arena in London. Although it had been ten years since "Suspicion," the audience had not forgotten Terry Stafford. Billboard correspondent Bill Williams reported, "Newcomer Terry Stafford of Atlantic was the night's biggest winner whose songs were recognized and heavily applauded."

The next month Stafford returned to Nashville and Jack Clement's Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa with Earl Poole Ball to begin work on a second album for Atlantic. Stafford again chose the songs, "We've Grown Close" (previously recorded for MGM), plus two collaborations with Paul Fraser, "Dang! Ole Rodeo" and "Blue Goes with Anything," and one with Don Epperson, "Don't Knock It Till You've Cried It." These songs would be the title of the album.
Stafford got back together with Earl Poole Ball to cut two songs, “Darling Think It Over” and “I Can’t Find It” (Melodeland ME 6099)114 “Darling Think It Over” received a favorable review in the May 10, 1975, Cash Box. Terry’s first release for Melodeland Records is produced by Earl Ball and already gaining airplay. ... Vocals are deep and rich and will help this one see more action regionally and nationally.”...

In the meantime, Mike Curb had another film project in the works, Death Riders, a documentary that follows the Death Riders Motorcycle and Auto Thrill Show as it barnstormed the countryside in the summer of 1974.111 Curb was in charge of the music, and he recruited several artists from the Melodeland roster (Dorsey Burnette, T.G. Sheppard, Pat Boone, Jerry Naylor, Kenny Seratt, and Stafford) for the soundtrack of songs penned by Porter Jordan and Jerry Styner. Stafford sings “Sunny Side Up” and “Sunshine Baby.” Director James Wilson blends the music with the action interjecting touches of sly humor along the way. For example, the barnstormers put on a show at a nudist colony, and during a motorcycle jump over a line of volunteers outstretched in the nude, “Sunny Side Up” can be heard over the action.

Lighthearted, yes, but in the interim, the powers-that-be at Melodeland decided not to issue a Stafford follow-up single — “She’s Out of Control” b/w “Reba,” again produced by Earl Poole Ball — which had already been assigned a release number (Melodeland ME 6022F).112 Even more troubling, Motown ditched the Melodeland moniker, and Stafford’s association with the organization ended, as well.113 Once again an affiliation with a major company dissolved in frustration and unfilled expectations. From this point on, Terry Stafford worked only with independent labels based primarily in Nashville.

Without a record contract, Stafford turned to the road, still focusing on the country music audience. “In 1975, I got [another] band together, including Ron Griffith of the Lively Ones, and we toured Colorado and did local clubs. We had a decent sound, but something happened and the group folded.”114 He booked himself as a solo act in clubs on the West Coast before resuming his partnership with Johnny Fortune. “[Johnny] traveled with me some and played guitar for me, and also acted as my musical director.”115 Then it was on to the New England and Canadian circuits with the Don Mayberry Band.

Stafford did cut two tunes for Casino Records, a division of GRT (General Recorded Tape), the manufacturer of reel-to-reel, 8-track, and cassette tapes. Again produced by Earl Poole Ball, “It Sure Is Bad to Love Her” and “Don’t Knock It Till You’ve Cried It” (Casino GRT-115) are both Stafford originals. The former is a sparerly accompanied version of the same song included on the Sweet Gypsy Rose album, the latter, with the clever play-on-words title, is the co-quette with Don Epperson previously intended for the unrelaunched Atlantic album. “It Sure Is Bad to Love Her” is another of Stafford’s reflections on a man who finds himself in a relationship with a woman who has the emotional upper hand. “She’s different from any woman that I have ever known / And she can be so good to me when she wants to but she don’t / People always looking up to her while she’s looking down on me.” “It Sure Is Bad to Love Her” barely slipped onto Billboard’s Hot Country Singles at Number 94 in March 1977.116 I never saw a copy.”117 Stafford admitted.118 It would be twelve years before a Stafford record again graced the Billboard country chart.

In the 1980 interview with Robert Dalley, Terry Stafford enthused about recently inking an agreement, once more initiated by John Fisher, with a new company, Frontline/Firstline Records. “After signing with Firstline, I went to Nashville in January of 1980 and recorded a real good album using Tammy Wynette’s recording studio and top line Nashville session men. It should be out at any time now.”119 Two of the songs — “Everybody Loves a Love Song” and “Texas Moon Palace,” a Stafford composition — are paired on a 45 (Firstline FLS-710). “Texas Moon Palace” is a feel-good tip of the hat to the Lone Star State. “So shine on while they're playing our song / We heard it in Houston and Dallas / But we'll spend the night where the feeling is right / Here at the Texas Moon Palace.” The single went unnoticed; as for the Firstline album, it never appeared.

Stafford stayed on the road eschewing, for the most part, the nostalgia circuit. “I never booked myself on any ‘oldies and goodies’ shows,” he told Robert Dalley, “because I feel my career has been progressing.”120 However, he did keep “Suspicion” in his set list much to the delight of live audiences. “I love ‘Suspicion,’ it was the most exciting thing in my life. There is nothing to compare to having your first hit record, especially at the age I was.”121 In a revealing aside, Stafford confessed, “It is more fun to sing now than it was back in 1964. I don’t feel the pressure now as I did when it was a hit. It was hard to live up to a #1 record.”122

During this period, Stafford’s recording activities were intermittent. It is unclear why he decided to wax a couple of gospel numbers in 1983 for little known Eastland Records. With Bob Summers occupying the producer’s chair, Stafford cut four singles, “Can You and Me Get Back Together” and “Life’s Railway to Heaven” (Eastland ERS 101). “Life’s Railway to Heaven” is the venerable nineteenth-century standard. “(Lord Can You and Me Get) Back Together” is one of Stafford’s own. “Lord, can you and me get back together / Can I talk to you like I did when I was young / Oh has it been too long since we’ve been together / Oh can I still get some help from someone.” It was around this time that Earl Poole Ball encountered Stafford at Nudie’s Rodeo Tailors in North Hollywood, and the two reminisced about their Nashville experiences. According to Ball, “He was [modestly upbeat] ... still the same Terry I knew.”123

John Fisher’s belief in Stafford’s abilities never wavered, either. Stafford also valued his relationship with Fisher. “It seems that most of the success I have had as a singer has been because of John Fisher’s involvement with my career.”124 In 1985, the two again joined forces at Fisher’s Fish-Wing Music Enterprises. A Fish-Wing press communiqué proclaimed, “TERRY STAFFORD Now Ready To Tour Texas;” furthermore, Nashville record producer John Fisher is hot with a new single on recording artist Terry Stafford, “Old Me Ya’” on Player International Records.”125 “Deja Vu” is a Stafford original, and the flipside is a re-recording of “Texas Moon Palace” (Player International PT-113).126 This record was the first of four Stafford 45s to be issued by the company over the next four years. “Love’s Been Hell on Me” b/w “Long Haul Fever” (Player International PT-115), released the same year, was not.127 “Love’s Been Hell on Me” was written by Jack Strong, and the subject matter — another man-woman romance gone away — is a familiar one to the Stafford song book. “Long Haul Fever” is Stafford’s contribution to the truck driving school of...
country music. “Two weeks on the road I ain’t had much rest / Trucking is my life and I try to do my best.”

While promoting “Love’s Been Hell on Me,” Stafford guested on Nashville Now, the live, nightly television variety show hosted by Ralph Emery on the Nashville Network. Minnie Pearl and Lorreta Lynn, sitting in for Emery, engaged Stafford in conversation, and his innate shyness and humility were readily apparent. Twenty-one years after the Dick Clark interview(s) on American Bandstand, Stafford, now a seasoned professional, was obviously still self-conscious in the spotlight, but he sang a poised “Love’s Been Hell on Me” and a poignant “Amarillo by Morning.”

John Fisher was also recording demos for independent songwriters, record labels, and publishing companies, and he often had Stafford lay down the vocal tracks when the singer was in Nashville. In 2010, ten of these collaborations surfaced on Terry Stafford’s From Out of the Past (Dorsey Recording: 1051). “Love’s Been Hell on Me” was one of the songs. Two others, Lyle H. Austin’s “They’re Growing Grass in the Old Comfied” and Jack Smart and Lynn Dorrall Smith’s “Strangers with the Same Last Name,” comprised Stafford’s third Player International 45 (Player International P1-125).

Even though his records attracted little attention, Stafford remained in the public eye. He performed on the syndicated television show Solid Gold in an episode that aired in January 1987. Stafford sang “Suspicion” in the Flashback segment. On February 18, 1989, after a dozen-year hiatus, Stafford reappeared on Billboard’s Hot Country Singles with “Lonestar Lonesome” (Player International P1-134). It hovered at the bottom of the rankings for three weeks, topping out at Number 89. The flipside, “Falling (It’s a Long Long Way from Hollis, Oklahoma),” is one of Stafford’s compositions. “Lonestar Lonesome,” co-written by Steven Stone and John Cunningham, is Stafford’s swan song on the Billboard chart.

The narrator of “Lonestar Lonesome” is currently arrived in Los Angeles, and he has already had to accept the fact that “I may be new in town but I’ve been around just long enough to find / There ain’t a thing in L.A. to ease this cowboy’s mind. Sitting alone in a bar after one drink too many, the woman he left behind in Houston weighs heavily on his mind. “There’s a love song on the jukebox just like in Texas / But, girl, there’s no one here just like you / And I’m Lonestar lonesome tonight.” Perhaps Stafford chose “Lonestar Lonesome” because Stone and Cunningham’s lyrics reminded him of his own arrival in the City of Angels nearly thirty years earlier. There’s no missing the autobiographical flavor of “Falling (It’s a Long Long Way from Hollis, Oklahoma).” First, of course, is the reference to Hollis, Oklahoma, the town where Stafford was born. Then there is the storyline: a young man heads to California “to do some playing … searching for gold.” He meets a woman, who takes him “to her world high on a mountain / Somewhere above Hollywood town.” The singer soon realizes he’s out of his element. “It’s a long, long way from Hollis, Oklahoma / To the top of the Hollywood hills / Her love let me drop to the bottom from the top / And the fall is hurting me still.” He finds neither “gold” nor love. “And if I had a ride I’d be leaving this morning / Back home to those Oklahoma hills.”

“Lonestar Lonesome” and “Falling” are indications that Stafford’s thoughts were increasingly turning to home. In fact, he regularly came back to the Lone Star State to see his family and friends. In a 1973 interview with Globe-Times staff writer George Turner, Stafford proudly acknowledged, “Amarillo always looks beautiful to me, whether it’s windy or not.” Dugg Collins maintained that “had the music opportunities been available in Amarillo that awaited him in Los Angeles, I know he would have never left. Getting back home, even for just a short visit, was always on his mind. He loved Amarillo, Texas.”

In the summer of 1995, Stafford returned to Amarillo for what proved to be the final time. He had been battling liver and kidney ailments for four years, but he was excited about a potential record deal with a company in Dallas. Sadly during the next several months, Stafford’s condition continued to worsen. Hospitalized and placed on a respirator in intensive care, he received few visitors. Dugg Collins would not be denied entrance, however, and he describes their poignant hospital paring. “I said … Terry, I know you can’t speak with that thing in your throat, but just wiggle your fingers to let Ol’ Dugg know that you know I came to see you.” Stafford wiggled his fingers. Collins put his friend’s hand down on the bed and left the room. Terry Stafford, age 54, died a few days later on March 17, 1996. He is buried in the city’s Llano Cemetery.
Terry was his own worst enemy. He wrote some great songs, but he never wanted to turn them over to major publishing companies to pitch to other artists. As for “Suspicion,” Stafford understood that for many listeners the song would always define his career. However, as he made clear, “I do not regard myself as an oldie. … I still have a bit of irony, then, Stafford’s own suspicion.”152 Still, the song would always define his career. However, as he made clear, “I do not regard myself as an oldie. … I still have a bit of irony, then, Stafford’s own suspicion.”153

Amarillo is where I’ll be.

If he never got the next big break his talents deserved, Terry Stafford as a one-hit wonder, it should also be evident that he never wanted to turn them over to major publishing companies to pitch to other artists.

After his ordeal with Crusader, it was hard to earn his trust. … In some ways, Terry was his own worst enemy. He wrote some great songs, but he never wanted to turn them over to major publishing companies to pitch to other artists.

companies to pitch to other artists. … I believe he could have been one of the most successful country writer/artists in the business if he had trusted a few more people.”150

In a bit of irony, then, Stafford’s own suspicion. … They put a paper bag over the organ’s Leslie speaker”; see “The Mark V,” http://www.tunecore.com/artist/DannyFaragher [accessed August 6, 2014].

151. The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford


Notes

1 Portions of this paper were presented at the annual meeting of the West Texas Historical Association held in Amarillo on April 11, 2015. A special thanks to Larry Beyers, a longtime fan of Terry Stafford and aficionado of Texas Country Music, for providing rare recordings of Stafford’s personal correspondence with the singer and other associates, along with valuable support for the project. Paganelli’s Country Music Discography (http://countrymusicography.blogspot.com/terry-stafford) and Terry Stafford “Suspicion” Home Page (http://keepkey.yochanan.net/terry/terry/terry) are essential sources for following Terry Stafford’s recording career.

2 For additional tips and suggestions, a tip of the hat to Earl Paul Birk, Jr., Dan Coffey, Dagg Collins, Stan Jones, Melody Kelley, Justin Lomotien, Jack Penso, Mike Perez, Tyreek Stoddard Smith, Mary Helen Specht, and Andy Villanom.

3 Hot 100, Billboard, April 6, 1964, 26.

4 Hot 100, Billboard, April 11, 1964, 22.


9 Carr and Mundo, Pronto Nights in Neon Lights, 38, 65.

10 Ibid., 129.

11 Dalley, “Terry Stafford.”


13 Dalley, “Terry Stafford.”

14 Ibid.


16 Dalley, “Terry Stafford.”


18 Ibid.


20 Pomeranz and Humana’s “Night Ride,” which is included on the CD, was one of the songs produced by Presley himself.


22 Pomeranz and Humana’s “Night Ride,” which is included on the CD, was one of the songs produced by Presley himself.

23 Dalley, Terry Stafford.”

24 Danny Faragher, who was active in the West Coast music scene of the mid-1960s, met John Fisher when Faragher’s band, The Mark V, recorded a session under Fisher’s direction. “Fisher helped to tell the story of how the song came to sound in Suspicion. They put a paper bag over the organ’s Leslie speaker”; see “The Mark V,” http://www.dannyfaragher.com/tuner [accessed August 2, 2014].


29 Buck Owens with Randy Poe, Buck ‘Em The Anthology of Buck Owens (Milwaukee, WI: Buddha Records, 2015), 222-225.
