

Buck Owens

Country singer, songwriter, guitarist, television personality, entrepreneur, producer, booking agent; b. August 12, 1929, Sherman, Texas; d. March 25, 2006, Bakersfield, California; son of sharecroppers Alvis Edgar Owens, Sr. and Maicie Azel Ellington. Buck Owens helped forge the so-called “Bakersfield sound” in country music, and he also co-hosted the popular television show *Hee Haw* for nearly twenty years.

Owens grew up on a farm near Sherman, Texas, near the Oklahoma border. He was only three when he adopted the nickname “Buck,” the same name as the family’s donkey. The Owens family had always been musical, and Buck’s mother taught her children to play the piano and sing gospel songs. Buck also listened to a variety of radio stations, and he eventually learned to play both mandolin and guitar.

By 1937, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl had hit North Texas and Oklahoma especially hard, and the Owens family, along with millions of other desperate farm workers, packed up their belongings and headed west. The Owens’s trailer broke down in Mesa, Arizona, so they decided to settle there. By the age of 13, Owens was forced to quit school and work in the fields to help support his family, although he did find time to polish his musical skills and perform on local radio.

In 1945, at the age of 17, Owens began performing with fellow musician Ray Britton on KTYL radio in Mesa as part of The Buck and Britt Show. By the late 1940s, Owens was playing steel guitar with a band named Mac and the Skillet Lickers while also driving a produce truck to and from southern California. Owens fell in love with the Golden State, so, in 1950, he moved with his new wife, Bonnie Campbell, and their two sons to Bakersfield, California.

Throughout the 1950s, Owens performed at a variety of local nightclubs, including the Corral and the Blackboard. He also traveled to Los Angeles on occasion to play bigger gigs with such musicians as Tommy Collins, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Gene Vincent, Wanda Jackson, and Del Reeves. During the mid-1950s, Owens recorded a few songs with the Pep label. By 1957, he had signed with Capitol Records, but this partnership yielded only limited success.

In 1958, Owens divorced Bonnie and decided to invest his savings in one-third of a radio station in Washington State. It was in Washington that Owens met and married his second wife Janna Jae Greif, and the two had a child. He also met a sixteen-year-old fiddle player named Don Rich who would become Owens’s best friend and guitar player. Rich and Owens soon decided to move back to Bakersfield to start a new band, The Buckaroos.

The Buckaroos first Number One hit was the 1963 release “Act Naturally.” Owens soon followed this with numerous other hits, including “Sam’s Place,” “Before You Go,” “It’s Crying

Time Again,” “My Heart Skips a Beat,” “I’ve Got a Tiger by the Tail,” “Waiting in the Welfare Line,” “Think of Me,” “Under Your Spell Again,” and “Second Fiddle.” With fifteen consecutive Number One hit songs, Owens helped pioneer the “Bakersfield Sound,” a more hard-edged style of honky-tonk that included rock and pop influences, along with tight harmonies and twangy guitar licks. The high-energy and sparse instrumentation pioneered by Owens and other Bakersfield artists, including Merle Haggard, Tommy Collins, and Roy Nichols, was the antithesis of the heavily orchestrated country music that dominated Nashville at the time.

The 1960s were very productive years for Owens. He performed at Carnegie Hall in 1966, opened his own publishing company, Bluebook, toured Japan in 1967, played at the White House, purchased KNIX and KUZZ radio stations, and signed on as co-host of the popular television show *Hee Haw* in 1969.

Tragedy struck Owens in 1974 with the loss of his long-time friend and guitarist, Don Rich, who died in a motorcycle accident. Owens was devastated and stopped recording, although he still performed on *Hee Haw* until 1986. By 1987, popular country singer Dwight Yoakam had convinced Owens to appear with him at a small fair. In January 1988, Owens and Yoakam performed “Streets of Bakersfield” before a live television audience for the *30 Years in Country Music* special. The song skyrocketed to Number One on the charts. In April, they again performed together at the Academy of Country Music Awards.

In 1993, Owens had a piece of his tongue removed after doctors discovered that he had throat cancer. In 1996, Owens was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. In the late 1990s, he also opened a restaurant, club, and museum in Bakersfield called the Crystal Palace, where he played every Friday and Saturday night.

Owens died in his sleep of an apparent heart attack after performing at the Crystal Palace on March 25, 2006. He was buried at the Greenlawn Southwest Cemetery in Bakersfield. He is survived by his ex-wives and three sons, Buddy Alan, Michael, and Johnny Owens. Buck Owens not only had a tremendous influence on a number of other artists, including Merle Haggard, Linda Ronstadt, Gram Parsons, the Eagles, Dwight Yoakam, Garth Brooks, Brad Paisley, and BR-549, but he also helped pioneer a new sound that would have an impact throughout mainstream country music. In addition, he had songs recorded by a diverse group of artists ranging from Ray Charles to the Beatles.

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