

# Ace in the Hole Band

**Ace in the Hole Band:** The Ace in the Hole Band has been country superstar George Strait's back up band since 1975. The original members, which included George Strait (vocals and guitar), Ron Cabal (lead guitar), Mike Daily (steel guitar), Terry Hale (bass), and drummer Ted Stubblefield, who was replaced early on by Tommy Foote, met while they were students enrolled at Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) in San Marcos.

The Ace in the Hole Band rose from the ashes of Stoney Ridge, a group that had included Daily, Hale, Cabal, Foote, and vocalist Jay Dominguez. In July 1975, Dominguez left the band, and Foote moved to Houston after graduating from the university. The remaining members began posting flyers across campus, advertising for a new vocalist. George Strait, at the time a young agriculture major, auditioned and was quickly hired as lead singer. The band played its first show as Ace in the Hole on October 13, 1975, at Kent Finlay's Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos. Ted Stubblefield, who also was a member of Kent Finlay's group, High Cotton Express, played drums for both bands for a short time. Foote returned to San Marcos to replace Stubblefield in late 1975, and the core Ace in the Hole lineup was formed. In 1983, Foote relinquished his position as drummer to become the band's road manager, a job he continues to hold today.

During the mid-1970s, Cheatham Street Warehouse provided a particularly fertile environment for the development of such groups as Ace in the Hole. Finlay booked a variety of dynamic young acts, including Asleep at the Wheel, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Jerry Jeff Walker, Alvin Crow, and others, and the bands that played at Cheatham Street often came by on their nights off to listen to each other and engage in a spirit of friendly competition. Ace in the Hole's main hometown "competition" at that time was Joe Bob's Bar and Grill Band, led by Joe Bob Burris, a talented singer-songwriter who continues to perform locally. Ace in the Hole played nearly every week at Cheatham Street for six years during the mid to late 1970s, before it broke into the national market in the early 1980s.

From the outset, Ace in the Hole played mainly traditional country music, including honky tonk and western swing, by such artists as Bob Wills, Hank Williams, Johnny Bush, George Jones, and Merle Haggard. In fact, the group had difficulty finding work in Austin venues, which were caught up in the "Progressive Country" movement at the time and had little interest in hiring a more traditional country band.

Around 1976, Mike Daily's father, Don Daily (son of Pappy Daily, founder of "D Records" in Houston), decided to record the band. He arranged for the group to go to Doggett Studios in Houston Heights and cut the Dallas Frazier tune "The Honky Tonk Downstairs." On the flip side was Strait's own composition, "I Just Can't Go on Dying Like This." The single was released to regional radio stations throughout the Southwest, and it received airplay on stations in Houston and Oklahoma. Approximately one year later, the band had added Bill Mabry on fiddle, and it recorded the Clay Blaker song "Lonesome Rodeo Cowboy," along with another Strait tune, "That Don't Change the Way I Feel About You." Within a year, the band cut Blaker's "The Loneliest Singer in Town" and another Strait composition, "I Don't Want to Talk It Over Anymore." During this session, the band also recorded "Right or Wrong" and an instrumental version of "Little Liza Jane," neither of which have ever been released. The three George Strait compositions were later released on the multi-platinum MCA box set *George Strait: Strait Out of the Box*.

In 1977, Cheatham Street Warehouse owner Kent Finlay, local songwriter Darrell Staedtler, and George Strait drove to Nashville in hopes of making connections for Strait in the Nashville music scene. At the time, most Nashville record executives were promoting a pop-oriented country sound and were not interested in Strait's more traditional approach. Nevertheless, Strait did record several good demos in Nashville and made some initial contacts that would eventually lead to his first record deal.

The most important contact Strait made in Nashville was reconnecting with MCA Records A&R man, Erv Woolsey, who had once owned the Prairie Rose night club in San Marcos, where Ace in the Hole had performed. Through Woolsey, Strait would later sign his first record deal with MCA in 1981. By 1984, he had become one of the most popular entertainers in country music, and Woolsey left MCA to become Strait's full-time manager. Strait's commitment to more traditional country music would revolutionize the mainstream country market and inspire legions of younger "neo-traditional" artists.

The 1980s brought several changes to Ace in the Hole, as Strait began touring nationally. In 1983, piano player Rondal Huckaby joined the group, and drummer Roger Montgomery replaced Tommy Foote, who became road manager. In 1984, Ron Cabal left the band and was replaced by Rick McRae and Benny McArthur on guitars. Fiddler Gene Elders joined the band in 1985, and, in 1987, Mike Kennedy became the group's newest drummer. In

1990, Cabal wrote a book entitled *A Honky Tonk Odyssey, My Eight Years with George Strait*. Cabal was later killed in 1996 in a hit and run accident outside of Austin.

Although Ace in the Hole is primarily George Strait's touring band, the members also have recorded with Strait in the studio. Perhaps the most notable of their studio recordings was Strait's 1987 release, "Ocean Front Property," which was the first country song ever to enter the charts at Number 1. The band members also were featured in Strait's critically and commercially-acclaimed 1992 movie *Pure Country*. In 1994, the Ace in the Hole Band recorded a CD without Strait that featured guest vocalists Darrell McCall and Mel Tillis

As of 2006, the Ace in the Hole Band included Terry Hale (bass guitar), Mike Daily (steel guitar), Ron Huckaby (piano), Rick McRae (lead guitar), Benny McArthur (lead guitar and fiddle), Mike Kennedy (drums), Gene Elders (fiddle and mandolin), Jeff Sturms (acoustic guitar), John Michael Whitby (keyboards), and Marty Slayton and Wes Hightower (backup vocals). When not on tour with Strait, the band members stay busy with a variety of other projects. Gene Elders performs with Lyle Lovett, and Ron Huckaby, Rick McRae, and Benny McArthur play with a variety of other musicians throughout Texas. Mike Daily records and produces other artists and is active in music publishing with Tommy Foote.

*Grant Mazak*