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"Amarillo By Morning"
The Life and Songs of Terry Stafford 1

Joe W. Specht
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Terry LaVerne 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 I was growing up. I made my singing debut when I 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 leader was Eugene Nelson. … I also got some exposure to Texas swing music [with] Roy Terry & the Pannee Playboys.”

Amarillo has a rich country music heritage. A Panhandle fiddle tradition personified by Alexander “Eck” Robertson, who first brought the distinctive Texas fiddle style to the national scene in 1922, dates to at least the town’s founding in 1887.7 In the 1930s, Son Lankford, Bob Willis’s cousin, fronted the Sons of the West, a western swing band with a popular presence not only in Amarillo but also in Borger, Pampa, and surrounding towns; after World War II, Billy Briggs and the NTT Boys enjoyed a similar local renown.8

In the mid-1950s, a nascent rock and roll movement also emerged. After watching Elvis Presley bring the house down at Amarillo’s Municipal Auditorium on October 13, 1955, the Rhythm Orchids, led by West Texas State College students Buddy Knox (from Happy) and Jimmy Bowen (of Dumas), became part of the West Texas rockabilly vanguard.9 The rock beat caught Terry Stafford’s ear, too. “I really liked Buddy Holly and Elvis, they were major influences on my singing style.” Stafford became the vocalist with another pioneering Panhandle combo, the Rhythm Teens, organized by Rick Tucker and Larry Trider.10

After graduating from Palo Duro High and with plans to seek his musical fortune, Stafford headed to northern California to stay with an aunt, later relocating to the Los Angeles area to live with a cousin, Ted 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.11 His cousin managed the Lively Ones, a surf group under contract to Del-FI Records. Occasionally 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 (1980 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.14 Stafford resumes his account, “John Fisher liked it and he did some remixing and mastering and promised to have it out by January, 1964. … ‘Suspicion’ (Crusader C-101) was the ‘Pick of The Week’ on KFWB. The single and the album took off from there.”

Terry Stafford discovered “Suspicion” on Elvis Presley’s 1962 album Pot Luck with Elvis (RCA Victor LPM/LSP 2523). The “King of Rock and Roll” wanted the song at a late night-early morning session on March 19, 1962, in Nashville at RCA’s Studio B.16 A tom-tom-like percussion propels the momentum of the lyrics with the Jordanaires chiming in on the chorus. As Presley archivist-discographer Ernst Jorgensen points out, “[‘Suspicion’] seemed built to showcase every little vocal trick in [Elvis’s] bag, without ever developing into parody. … It had not written all over it.” Nevertheless, the song remained tucked away on Side 2 of Pot Luck until Terry Stafford rescued it. “Suspicion” was written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman.
Pomus, née Jerome Solon Felder, had been on the New York City music scene for twenty years, first as a singer and bandleader and then as songwriter. After teaming with Shuman in 1958 and under contract to Hill & Range, the publisher that controlled the music recorded by Elvis, the two delivered a string of hits for the Drifters, Dion and the Belmonts, Andy Williams, the Mystics, and especially Presley: “A Mess of Blues,” “Surrender,” “Little Sister,” “(That’s the Name) His Latest Flame,” and “Viva Las Vegas” to name a few.18 Pomus also took a fledgling Phil Spector under his wing. Spector, who soon became a world-famous record producer and creator of the so-called “Wall of Sound,” hung out at the Brill Building, headquarters to music agencies and publishers including Hill & Range.19 Spector produced some demos of Pomus’s compositions for Elvis Presley, perhaps even the “Suspicion” demo.20

“Suspicion” is a snapshot of a relationship unraveling from within. “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 distrust 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 “sounds-like Elvis” way of singing, and he is often categorized as a Presley imitator, just another one of the “Elvises.”21 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.”22 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.”23 According to John Fisco, placing a paper bag over the organ’s Leslie speaker further enhanced the distinctive accompaniment.24 In addition, on the final mix for the commercial release, a vocal chorus with prominent female voices echoes sympathetically, intermingling 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 had Top-40 success on Billboard’s country chart: in 1972 for Bobby G. Rice (Royal American 48) and in 1988 for Ronnie McDowell (Carib 19508).25 In 2008, Bob Summers, again playing most of the instruments, produced Ed Grenewald’s “Suspicion” (BSM Sounds), which was intended as part of an iTunes download tribute to Stafford.26

Terry Stafford’s recording of “Suspicion” entered Billboard’s Hot 100 list on February 22, 1964, and began a steady ascent.27 By March 28, it reached Number 9, poised to break the Beatles stranglehold on the Top 5.28 The song remained in the Top 10 for seven consecutive weeks.29 Stafford received an invitation to appear on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand on March 28, 1964, to sing (lip-sync) his hit record. During the requisite interview afterwards, Stafford was modest, self-efficacious, 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.”29

Two weeks after lip-synching 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.30 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
with his 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…. I enjoyed seeing them all because there were some great entertainers on those shows.”

Back in Los Angeles, John Fisher assembled eleven recently recorded Stafford tracks along with the hit record for an album, not surprisingly titled SOSPETTO! (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 inkling or hint’ and that is what Terry’s recording has been for you, only a hint of what is 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’.

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and many other top-flight performances in the sensational ‘Suspicion Style.'” One of the songs Terry sings “in sensational ‘Suspicion Style’” is “Kiss Me Quick,” also from Elvis’s Pet Lick album. It, too, was written by Doc Pomus and Mort Shuman.

With Stafford's Crusader 45 (45 p.m., a record designed to play at 45 revolutions per minute, also known as a “single”) already in Billboard's Top 10, RCA belatedly attempted to muscle in on the action by combining Presley's “Suspicion” with “Kiss Me Quick” (RCA Victor 447-6639), but it was too late. The record-buying public had already declared Stafford's million-seller the winner. Elvis's single with “just over” 200,000 copies sold was his “worst performing” to date.33 London Records picked up the option to release Stafford's version in the U.K., and “Suspicion” circulated worldwide as London issued label-specific 45s in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Venezuela. Stafford even re-recorded “Sospetto” in Italian.34

Stafford was clearly on a roll. The follow-up ballad, “I'll Touch a Star” (Crusader C-105), advanced to Number 25 on the Hot 100.35 It returned to American Bandstand for a second time on July 18, 1964. During the on-camera interview with Dick Clark, the host asked, “You've had right good luck so far. Does the future scare you at all? You know once you get one hit you have to get the second. Now you've had two in a row. Do you worry about the third one yet?” Stafford frankly admitted, “Sure … I think it's always something that always scares you.”36

The “third one” proved to be elusive. Even though the Billboard review gave “Follow the Rainbow” (Crusader C-109) a thumbs-up — “Another relaying 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.37 The popularity of “Suspicion” persisted, though, and Stafford was on the road during the summer and fall of 1964, touring the United States and Canada. In November, Stafford, along with Dot recording artist Jimmie Rodgers and one of Phil Specto's girl groups,

and the Crystals, flew to Australia for appearances in Sydney and in Wellington, New Zealand.38

However, things were not going well at Crusader Records. In August, Billboard reported “the sudden departure” of John Fisher.39 “At the time they [Crusader] were having management difficulties,” Stafford told Robert Dalley, “and I was having contractural disputes so everything fell apart.”40 According to Don Perry, who met Stafford through Bob Summers and later worked with the singer, Crusader advanced Stafford “a few thousand dollars,” but when the company went belly-up, “Terry never received another dime in royalties.”41 A cache of Fisher-produced Crusader tracks have never been released, either.42

After the disappointment at Crusader, Stafford regrouped. He maintained his association with both Bob Summers and John Fisher. Indeed, these two men continued to fill important roles off and on throughout Stafford's career. Mel Shauer, Stafford's new manager, first worked out a deal with Mercury Records.43 With Bob Summers at the control board, Stafford recorded “Forbidden” and “Out of the Picture” (Mercury 72558). “Forbidden,” an obvious “Suspicion” imitation, was penned by Bobby Lane, and “Out of the Picture” is the handbook of the hit-writing team of Tommy Boyce and Bobby Hart. However, neither tune created much excitement among fans.
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 lieutenant 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.

Summers also arranged and presided over the release of two Sidewalk singles for Stafford: “When Sin Stops — Love Begins” b/w “Soldier Boy” (Sidewalk 902) and “The Joker on Me” b/w “A Step or Two Behind You” (Sidewalk 914). “A Step or Two Behind You” is a Stafford original. The affiliation with Mike Curb allowed Stafford the opportunity to further hone his songwriting skills ("Judy," the flipside of "Suspicion," was a Stafford co-write). He furnished former Cricket Jerry Naylor with “Would You Believe” (Tower 246), and he even tried his hand at producing. With Bob Summers arranging, Stafford supervised Stan Lee Black’s revival of a couple of oldies, “Be Bop a Lula” and “Raising My Heart” (Alamo International 222).38

Le Spis Vengono dal Semifreddo or Dr. Goldfoot and the Girl Bongs (Tower T 5035) became the first soundtrack album on which Stafford was involved. Filmed 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 Machine. Stafford’s "Try My World Little Girl" with that distinctive organ sound, this time spotlighted in a doodling 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" battling 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.

For 1966’s Wild Wheels, Stafford also made his big screen acting debut as “Hurty,” a dune buggy-riding surfer whose club tangles with a motorcycle pack.39 Shot on Pismo Beach, Wild Wheels starred Don Epperson, a familiar face to American International Pictures devotees.40 Stafford, the thespian, does not steal any scenes, but he does get to sing “Wine, Women, and Song,” for his pals and their bikini-clad girlfriends at an after-dark nightclub, “Night Ride,” written by Stafford, is a tune faintly heard on the jacketbox bike: “Night ride the sun has fallen / Night ride the winds are howling / Night ride the dunes are calling me.” With the Pacific Ocean as backdrop, Terry and Don Epperson, both with guitars in hand, are posed atop dune buggies on the front cover of the soundtrack album (RCA Victor LSO 1156).

In February, prior to the filming of Wild Wheels, Stafford and 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 a man would learn” — backed 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 long and didn’t make any noise. But Buck Owens heard [“Big in Dallas”] somewhere and liked it.”41 Owens continues the story, “I was in Dallas doing a tour,
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.” Owens contacted Stafford asking if he “could do a little re-writing,” along with the title change, and Stafford agreed. Owens shortened the song from three verses to two, omitting several lines, but the sense of stoic acceptance is unaltered.

Owens’s studio version of “Big in Vegas” (Capitol 2646) climbed to Number 5 on Billboard’s Hot Country Singles in December 1969. A live version served as the title track of Owens’s next album, The Buck Owens Show Big in Vegas (Capitol ST 415), and he performed “Big in Vegas” for a nationwide television audience on The Ed Sullivan Show. According to Owens, it became one of his most requested songs. “If I was doing a show, I was going to be doing ‘Big in Vegas’ because my fans demanded it.” Appropriately enough on March 24, 2006, at his Crystal Palace music hall in Bakersfield, California, in what would be Owens’s final appearance (he died in his sleep the next morning), “Big in Vegas” was the last song he sang. For Stafford, “[Big in Vegas] was my first successful hit as a writer,” cause for those in the music industry to sit up and take notice again. Stafford and Owens received a 1970 BMI Citation of Achievement as logged by BMI for broadcast performances of the song. Even though he had only changed the title and condensed Stafford’s lyrics, Owens, when commenting on the genealogy of “Big in Vegas,” still seemed reluctant to give Stafford his due. “It was his idea,” the head Buckaroo acknowledged, “and something that I enlarged upon. It worked out well for him because I’m sure it paid the rent one month.” The comment about one month’s rent might seem flippant and certainly not literally true, but those who had business dealings with Buck Owens learned that he was a hardnosed negotiator when it came to allocating royalty percentages, which is apparently what happened in Stafford’s case. The encounter with Owens provided yet another reality check for Terry Stafford.

While Stafford had stopped touring, he continued to concentrate on songwriting and production. A friendship with Don Epperson developed when the two were filming Wild Wheels, and Stafford, inspired by the 1969 Paul Newman and Robert Redford western, furnished Epperson with the dramatic spoken-word “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid” (Amaret 116, also Stateside 2C 006-91.586 M). Bob Summers introduced Stafford to Don Perry, a trailblazer in the field of independent music supervision and concert promotion, and the singer “became a fixture” in the offices of Don Perry Enterprises. The August 8, 1970, edition of Billboard reported, ‘Artist-writer Terry Stafford of ‘Suspicion’ fame is cutting an album for music production firm Don Perry Enterprises, Inc.’ Stafford and Perry were set to co-produce, with Bob Summers arranging, for their own company Phonograph Records. However, the album was not forthcoming.
About the same time, Terry Stafford briefly set up his own label, Bronco, and produced Garland Frady’s “Ft. Worth I Love You” b/w “Mr. Bojangles” (Bronco BJ 7112, also Paula P 1242).56 Stafford continued to work with Bob Summers, and he oversaw a second single for Garland Frady, “When Mama Comes to Town” b/w “Bottle of Wine” (Broadway Records 45-9563) for Don Perry Enterprises.57 “When Mama Comes to Town” is a Stafford original. 1971 is the year that Stafford, himself, returned to the studio. “I did a couple of singles for MGM … produced by Bob Summers and Don Perry; they were part of an album we did that was never released.”58 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 14232) 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.”59 “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 boards a Greyhound bus headed for the Golden State. Her goal is to become a professional dancer. “California dancer, she’s got to 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.” 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.”

In 1973, Stafford, with the support of John Fisher, now employed at Atlantic Records, signed with Atlantic’s newly formed country music division.60 “1973 was the start of what I’d call my second career,” Stafford later said to Robert Dalley. “I started getting really active as a performer again. I hadn’t performed anywhere except for some local things for about seven years [and] I signed with Atlantic and went to Nashville and recorded an album.”61 The venerable R&B and jazz label opened an office in Music City in 1972, in addition to Stafford, Willie Nelson and John Prine were also on the roster.62 Fisher asked Earl Poole Ball, formerly a producer for Capitol Records whom he had met in Los Angeles, to work with Stafford.63 Although he modestly characterizes himself as “a rockabilly piano player and singer,” Earl Poole Ball, Jr.’s musical pedigree includes West Coast session assignments with Buck Owens and the Buckaroos, Gram Parsons and the International Submarine Band, and the Byrds.64 In Nashville, in addition to his work with Stafford, he produced albums for, among others, Freddie Hart and Johnny Cash. In 1977, Ball accepted an invitation from Cash, and for the next twenty years, he was the “go-to” piano player for the “Man in Black.”

For the Stafford sessions, Ball assembled a troupe of “A-Team” musicians, including Lloyd Green (steel guitar), Charlie McCoy (harmonica, vibes, harmonium), Hargus “Pig” Robbins (piano), and Tommy Allsup (tac-tac guitar). They all gathered at Jack Clement’s recording studio, a.k.a. The Cowboy Arms Hotel and Recording Spa, in July 1973.65 Prior to the first session, Ball and Stafford reviewed the list of thirteen songs the singer had selected to record. “Say, Has Anybody Seen My Sweet Gypsy Rose” and a remake of “Suspicion” were on the list, along with a co-write with his buddy Don Epperson, “Road House Country Singer.” In a bit of serendipity, Stafford chose “Big in Vegas” not realizing that Ball was, in fact, the piano player on the Buck Owens recording.66 In addition to these songs, Stafford selected “Amarillo by Morning,” a song he had co-written with Paul Fraser. Stafford crossed paths with Fraser, a self-described old rock and roller originally from Bend, Oregon, when Fraser settled in Los Angeles to escape the grind of touring.67 The two began writing together, and one of their earliest efforts was “Amarillo
“Amarillo By Morning”

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by Morning,” a song most closely associated with country superstar George Strait. Strait’s MCA 45-rpm release (MCA 52162), a Billboard Top Five country hit in 1983, helped define the up-and-coming Texan’s musical path.41 The tune has since become a standard heard regularly on the national rodeo circuit and in dancehalls throughout Texas. “Amarillo by Morning” is the iconic, late-night chronicle of a professional saddle bronc rider driving to the next gig at a country fair in Amarillo, Texas. “Amarillo by morning / Up from San Antone / Everything that I got / Is just what I’ve got on.” He is down on his luck without a saddle. Broke his leg in a rodeo dance in San Antonio.82 Paul Fraser’s account of the song’s origins, one story claims that Stafford sent to radio stations were stickered with suggested tracks

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.”49 In addition, Cash Box reported that, unknown to the company, Jim Christofferson, the program director at Amarillo’s KDJW (1360 AM), had flipped 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.44 Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame member Dugg Collins, who became a close friend of Stafford, was also on the staff at KDJW. “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.45 “Amarillo by Morning” premiered 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 song on his second self-released album, Strait From the Heart (MCA 5320), continues to

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 awarded on the basis of broadcast performances of Strait’s recording.45 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
Billboard's Hot Country Singles, staying at Number 35, while the group Dawn, featuring Tony Orlando, scored a best seller with the very same song on the pop chart.87 The album entitled We've Grown Close (Atlantic SD 18105) was to be the title of the album. 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 another whose songs were recognized and heavily applauded.”88

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. “Woman Sensuous Woman” had been a Number 1 hit for Don Gibson in 1972. “It’s a Matter of Time” was the flipside of Elvis Presley’s “ Burning Love.” There are three of Stafford’s own, including “Chilly Chicago” (previously recorded for MGM), plus two collaborations with Paul Fraser, “Dang’d Ole Rodeo” and “Blue Goes with Anything,” and one with Don Epperson, “Don’t Knock It Till You’ve Cried It.”90 “Amarillo By Morning” garnered sales for Stafford’s original, too.91

“Amarillo by Morning” resonates in other media, as well. Filmmaker Spike Jonze entitled his 1998 documentary short Amarillo 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.92 Screenwriter-producer-director Glen Stephen’s novel. Amarillo by Morning, follows former world champion bull rider Richard “Stick” Stalon, 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.93 Contemporary romance novelists also have a sweet spot for the scenario. Bay Matthews, Bethany Campbell, and Jodi Thomas have each published an Amarillo by Morning.94

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 25, 1974.95 Stafford reunited with Johnny Fortune, an associate from his Crusader Records days, and he used Fortune’s hand to begin touring again.96 These public appearances received approving notices, too. Billboard columnist Bob Kirsch, who was in the audience at the Palomino Club in L.A., stated that “Terry Stafford is a true 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.”97 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 missed Terry Stafford. Billboard correspondent Bill Williams reported, “Newcomer Terry Stafford of Atlantic was another whose songs were recognized and heavily applauded.”98

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. “Woman Sensuous Woman” had been a Number 1 hit for Don Gibson in 1972. “It’s a Matter of Time” was the flipside of Elvis Presley’s “ Burning Love.” There are three of Stafford’s own, including “Chilly Chicago” (previously recorded for MGM), plus two collaborations with Paul Fraser, “Dang’d Ole Rodeo” and “Blue Goes with Anything,” and one with Don Epperson, “Don’t Knock It Till You’ve Cried It.”99 “Amarillo By Morning” (Atlantic SD 18105) was to be the title of the album.
“We weren’t expecting this,” said Earl Poole Ball. Stafford remains in the can, yet to see the light of day. The move to shut down operations came as a surprise to many.

Billboard received the first single, “Stop If You Love Me” (Atlantic 4026), a line of volunteers outstretched in the nude, “Sunny Side Up” with independent labels based primarily in Nashville. “She’s Out of Control” b/w “Reba,” again produced by Earl Ball, will help this one see more action regionally and nationally. “Long Haul Fever” is Stafford’s contribution to the truck driving school of country music. “Deja Vu” is a Stafford original, 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 meshed perfectly with the company’s needs. Fisher assumed the title of Coordinator of Melodyland Records with responsibilities for promotion, sales, and acquisition of new artists. He soon brought Terry Stafford into the fold. Mike Curb also furnished the new company with established performers Pat Boone, Ronnie Dove, and Jerry Naylor, each of whom was under contract to him.”

Stafford got back together with Earl Poole Ball to cut two songs, “Darling Think It Over” and “I Can’t Find It” (Melodyland ME 6099F). “Darling Think It Over” received a favorable review in the May 10, 1975, Cash Box. “Terry’s first release for Melodyland 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.” Record World’s “Country Hot Line” reported the single “is showing strong action in the southwest.” Inexplicably, neither side made it into Billboard’s Hot Country Singles.

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. Curb was in charge of the music, and he recruited several artists from the Melodyland roster (Donny Burnett, T.G. Sheppard, Pat Boone, Jerry Naylor, Kenny Strott, and Stafford) for the soundtrack of songs penned by Porter Jordan and Jerry Synder. 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 Melodyland 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 (Melodyland ME 6022F). Even more troubling, Motown ditched the Melodyland moniker, and Stafford’s association with the organization ended, as well. 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.” 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.” 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-113) are both Stafford originals. The former is a sparsely 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-write with Don Epperson previously intended for the unreleased 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 be 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 chart, Number 94 in March 1977. “I never saw a copy,” Stafford admitted. 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.” Two of the songs — “Everybody Loves a Love Song” and “Texas Moon Palace,” a Stafford composition — are paired on a 45 (Frontline 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,ershewing, 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.” 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.” In a revealing aside, Stafford confessed, “It is more fun to sing now than it was back in 1960. 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.”

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 “(Lord, 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 / Or 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.”

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.” 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 ‘Deja Vu’ on Player International Records.” “Deja Vu” is a Stafford original, and the flipside is a re-recording of “Texas Moon Palace” (Player International P1-113). 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” was written by Jack Strong, and the subject matter — another man-woman romance gone awry — is a familiar one to the Stafford song bag. “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 / Truckin’ 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 Loretta Lynn, sitting in for Emery, engaged Stafford in conversation, and his innate shyness and humility was 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, that is until he stood in front of the microphone, where he sang a poignant “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 Cornfield” and Jack Smart and Lynn Dorvall Smith’s “Strangers with the Same Last Name,” comprised Stafford’s third Player International 45 (Player International P1-125). Ever 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 own song on the Billboard chart.

The narrator of “Lonestar Lonesome” is recently 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..."
Success in the entertainment business requires heart, smarts, guts, and luck. Of these requisites, Stafford must certainly had the first three. When asked about the twists and turns in his career, he was straightforward in his reply. “I can’t put my finger on any certain thing that might have hurt my career, but the music industry changed directions at the time ’Suspicion’ was out and I do think the Beatles and British Invasion on the national music scene affected my career some, as it probably did other American performers at the time.”

Then there were the problems at Crusader Records, which turned out to be a harbinger of what lay ahead: companies shutting down, albums going unreleased, and one-shot record deals. Yet, through all the peaks and valleys, Stafford attempted to maintain a positive attitude, albeit imbued with a stoic acceptance of the vicissitudes of the business itself. Witness the songs he wrote that fit this frame of mind: “Big in Dallas,” “California Dancer,” and “Amarillo by Morning.”

Stafford did not alter his singing style, either. The smooth delivery and the subtle inflections allowed him to appeal to both pop and country music audiences. “To me, he was always [a superlative] ballad singer,” Manassas, Virginia, musicologist Larry Blevins sums up. “Terry’s voice blended Southern roots heritage with cowboy-at-heart Texas soul.” Stafford’s personality and temperament were also constants. As Dugg Collins stated, “I will always remember him for his great talent and his easygoing manner, almost to the point of being shy. … Never did see Terry get upset over anything. … There was never an ounce of ego in the man’s makeup.” Earl Poole Ball concurs. “He was a shy and sensitive man … I never saw a big laugh or guffaw, maybe a slight smile now and then. … He was understated like someone who always has something in the back of his mind.”

Don Perry agreed. “[Terry] was a very down to earth guy and more talented than he realized. … The music 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 parting. “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.
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.

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Weigh on him. That said, while some persist in pigeonholing Stafford as a one-hit wonder, it should also be evident that he continually proved himself as both singer and songwriter. If he never got the next big break his talents deserved, Terry Stafford’s musical legacy endures: "Amarillo by morning. Amarillo is where I’ll be."

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Amarillo by morning, Terry Stafford ‘Suspicion’ Home Page (http://www.msltd.net/tstfrd) are essential sources for following Terry Stafford’s recording career.

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Amarillo By Morning: 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 Blades, a longtime fan of Terry Stafford and aficionado of his music. Larry provided rare recordings of Stafford, personal correspondence with the singer and other associates, along with valuable support for the project. "Pugnacious" Country Music Discography (http://countrymusicdiscography.blogspot.com/terry-stafford) and Terry Stafford "Suspicion" demo (http://shuckysongsarchive.net/terry) are essential sources for following Terry Stafford’s recording career. For additional tips and suggestions, a tip of the hat to Earl Poole, Larry provided rare recordings of Stafford, personal correspondence with the singer and other associates, along with valuable support for the project. "Pugnacious" Country Music Discography (http://countrymusicdiscography.blogspot.com/terry-stafford) and Terry Stafford "Suspicion" demo (http://shuckysongsarchive.net/terry) are essential sources for following Terry Stafford’s recording career. For additional tips and suggestions, a tip of the hat to Earl Poole.

2 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.

3 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.

4 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.

5 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.


8 Carr and Mundie, Prairie Nights to Neon Lights, 68, 65.

9 Ibid., 129.


12 Ibid., "Terry Stafford," 22.

13 Ibid.


15 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.


17 Ibid.


20 Pomus and Shuman’s “Night Riders,” which is included on the ‘64 album, was one of the songs produced by Presley himself; see Dan Prusacki, ‘The Leap with Elvis – The End of an Era’ (Melbourne: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, July 9, 2013). For a detailed discussion, see George Fuller, "Night Riders," In These Songs: The Life and Music of Doc Pomus, ed. Henri Sebilleau and Dominique Sebilleau (Paris: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 1994), 137-138.

21 Jamie Malinowski, "They Came, They Saw, They Conquered, They Disappeared," Juke, July 1985, 65.


24 Danny Farber, who was active in the West Coast music scene in the mid-1960s, met John Fisher when Farber’s band, The Mark V, recorded a session under Fisher’s direction: “Fisher loved to tell the story of how they got that strange sound in Suspension… They put a paper bag over the organ’s Leslie speaker”; see The Mark V, DaddyFarber.com, http://www.daddystafford.com/mother [accessed August 2, 2014].


33 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.

34 "New Smash Album by Terry Stafford," Billboard, April 18, 1964, 46.


37 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.

38 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.


40 "Top Single Picks," Billboard, August 8, 1964, 16.


42 [No Title], "Terry Stafford," 22.

43 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.


45 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.

46 Ibid., 22.


54 Dalley, "Terry Stafford," 22.


126 Joel Whitburn’s Top Country Singles, 353.
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Ball, interview.
134 Fab-Wing Music Enterprises, “TERRY STAFFORD New Ready To
Tour Tour.” [from release ca. 1985].
136 Ibid.
137 Larry Blevins supplied a DVD copy of the Stafford appearance, ca. late
1985.
138 Additional Stafford vocal tracks circulated on tape, including “Rainin’ in
Atlanta” and “Cowboy Morning Texas Style,” see Larry Blevins, letter to
141 Joel Whitburn’s Top Country Singles, 353; “Terry Stafford,” Praguefrank’s
Country Music Discographies.
142 George Turner, “Amarillo Beautiful, Singing Star Says,” Amarillo Globe-
143 Collins, email to the author.
144 “Obituary [Terry Stafford],” Goldmine, May 24, 1996, 71; Collins,
email to the author.
145 Collins, email to the author.
146 “Terry Stafford (Obituary),” Amarillo Globe-Times.
147 Dalley, “Terry Stafford,” 22.
149 Collins, email to the author.
150 Ball, interview.
151 “Don Perry Music Company.”
152 Ibid.