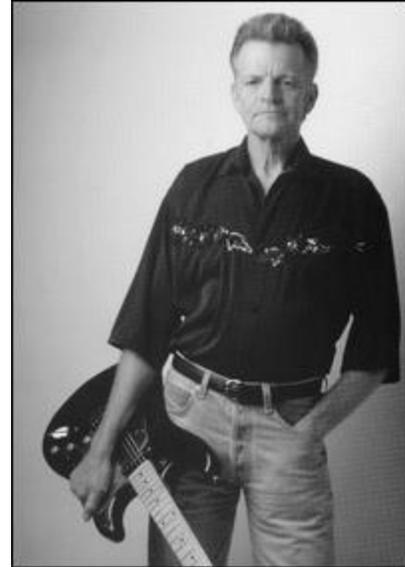


Ronnie Dawson

Ronald Monroe 'Ronnie' Dawson was a Texas rockabilly singer, songwriter and guitarist.

Born in Waxahachie to bandleader and bass player Pinky Dawson (of the Manhattan Merry-makers), Ronnie Dawson's musical career, based almost entirely in Texas, spanned from his early teenage years at the Waxahachie Southern Bible Institute to the months before his death from throat cancer in 2003. At the time of his death, he was considered an elder statesman, if not a legend, in the blues, rockabilly, and country roots rock and roll genres.



Although Dawson was raised in a family with a primarily fundamentalist Pentecostal faith, musical talent ran a close parallel. Dawson stated that although he did not see a movie until he was 17, he found himself with a guitar in hand at around age 14. In addition to guitar, Dawson's (now musically retired) father Pinky showed him how to play the mandolin, drums, and bass guitar.

Ronnie Dawson's freshman act was called 'Ronnie Dee and the D Men,' featuring his soaring tenor vocals, combined with a stand-out guitar sound based in rhythmic rock and roll with a hint of R&B, which was all the teenage rage in 1956. Within two months of its inception, the band Ronnie Dee and the D Men hesitantly entered (and confidently won) a talent contest for a spot on the popular and long-standing Dallas live radio show, The Big D Jamboree. This win earned the young band multiple appearances on the variety show, which aired from Dallas' Sportatorium, a legendary wrestling arena and music venue.

Ronnie Dee and the D Men were soon signed by Ed McLemore, manager for Gene Vincent, who was an occasional performer on the Big D Jamboree. With his assistance, the band soon recorded their first single on Backbeat Records, "Action Packed" b/w "I Make the Love." Radio play for "Action Packed" and their next single ("Rockin' Bones" on the McLemore label) gained steady ground, along with Dawson's reputation for giving an electric, acrobatic live performance that could challenge even the fiery young Elvis Presley. Incidentally, Dawson has claimed that his style of performance was taken not from Presley, but directly from the dynamic Pentecostal revivals that he still attended.

In addition to his musical performance skills, Ronnie Dawson cut a compelling figure onstage; also nicknamed 'The Blonde Bomber,' he was tall and lanky with a trademark blond

flat-top haircut and a wide, mischievous grin. More recording and television appearance offers arrived in swift succession.

Before long, star-maker Dick Clark signed the burgeoning young group to his Swan Records label and confirmed them for an appearance on *American Bandstand*. Ronnie Dee and the D Men never got to appear, however, for they had also arrived on the scene at the cusp of the Payola scandal. The surrounding hullabaloo cut short all their musical plans and what would have been perceived as their shot at the big time.

Undaunted, Ronnie Dawson continued his musical career with the help of some of his new connections. After the inevitable break-up of the D Men, Dawson toured as a featured guitarist with legendary Texas western-swing act The Light Crust Doughboys. He also employed his drumming skills for studio sessions of various popular artists at the time, such as Paul and Paula's "Hey Paula" and Bruce Channel's "Hey Baby" (also featuring Delbert McClinton on harmonica).

From 1959 to 1961 Ronnie Dawson recorded on several other labels (including Columbia Records) and, in the tradition of many artists of the era, reinvented himself under new musical personae with several recording pseudonyms like 'Commonwealth Jones' and 'Snake Munroe.' Dawson commented in a 1980s interview with radio show *The Hound* on Jersey City-based station WFMU that he chose 'Snake Munroe' as a pseudonym on Columbia because of his middle name (Monroe) and because he thought that the name 'Snake' 'sounded cool.' The song he recorded under the name Snake Munroe, called "Do Do Do", made waves in the R&B radio play circuit; Dawson said that Columbia was even under the impression that he was a black artist and attempted to market it as such. However even with the heavy airplay, "Do Do Do" didn't sell enough copies to propel Dawson to further musical success.

The early 1960s marked a transition in Dawson's life both musically and personally. He began a strict health regimen that he maintained for the duration of his lifetime; he also joined popular Dallas-based signing group The Levee Singers which, as the folk movement gained speed, experienced considerable success on nationwide television shows such as *Hootenanny* and *The Danny Kaye Show*. Throughout the 1960s, Dawson stayed in the Dallas area and worked with the Levee Singers until musical trends and other transitions had him beginning a new country-rock band called Steel Rail in the early 1970s.

Dawson experienced a good deal of local success with Steel Rail throughout the 1970s; it was at this time that he also began doing singing and voice-over work for television commercials. Dawson's deepened voice boomed into households everywhere as a 'down-home' personality touting Jax Beer, Aunt Jemima syrup and Hungry Jack pancake mix.

While Dawson was hard at work keeping himself afloat in the music business in Dallas, younger bands and music revivalists such as The Cramps began to dust off Dawson's old 45s and cover his old Ronnie Dee and the D Men songs. With the advent of the 1980s had begun a worldwide subcultural movement to bring back the older rockabilly artists of the 1950s, mainly by releasing their older cuts on CD and booking them to rockabilly-themed festivals.

With classic rockabilly cuts such as “Rockin' Bones” and “Action Packed,” Dawson's music endeared him to collectors and promoters on the festival circuit worldwide, and he found himself right at the top of most promoters' wish list. By the mid 1980s he found himself a star once again, arguably more than even the small taste of stardom he had experienced in his early years. His refusal to depart from the strong groove of country, blues, rockabilly and rock and roll

Dawson had had re-releases of his older music occurring consistently throughout the 1980s, but in the 1990s he began to write, record, and release new original material using younger rockabilly musicians with a authentic flair for recreation and reinvention of the rockabilly and blues genres. This resurgence of creativity that lasted the remainder of his life. In fact, many music journalists and critics believe that Ronnie Dawson's musical endeavors reached a summit in his later career years rather than his early years, even though he was performing the same style of music, firmly rooted in the country, blues and rockabilly genres, as he had in the 1950s. This continued pursuance of his early music is a departure from other white musical artists who had similar genre-specific careers of the era, and his success at delivering it 30 years later contributes strongly to his legendary status.

From 1995 up until (and past) his diagnosis of throat cancer in 2002, Ronnie Dawson's music continued to influence fans worldwide. Regional and national media touted Ronnie Dawson as a homegrown Texas legend, and with good reason. After his death on September 23, 2003, fans held multiple memorials worldwide. At all of these memorials, Ronnie Dawson's fans would loudly chant a heartfelt verse from his 1957 anthem, “Rockin' Bones.”

“Lord, when I die, don't you bury me at all

Just hang my bones up upon the wall

And under them bones let these words be seen:

Here's the runnin' gears of a boppin' machine!”

Caroline Gnagy