

Johnny Horton: More Than Just a Folk Balladeer

by Tim Wilton

It is the early morning hours of November 5, 1960 and nineteen-year-old **James Davis** has had way too much to drink. Barely able to stand and wanting to get home, he climbs into his truck, points it to Highway 79, and strikes out into the east Texas darkness. Like most boys his age, he had probably driven the roads leading in and out of the small town of Milano--sober or drunk--since he was old enough and big enough to peek over the steering wheel.

For Davis it must have been just another Friday night whose memories will more than likely be trumped by the customary Saturday morning hang-over. Not to worry, he probably thought, because he was young and there were a thousand more Friday nights just like this one waiting for him to enjoy and, with some luck, remember.

At about the same time, a big white Cadillac was streaming east on that same Highway 79 just outside of Milano. It had been a long day and night for the three men in the Cadillac and they were hurriedly driving to Louisiana so as to make the start of duck hunting season later on that morning.

Behind the wheel sat a lead-footed **Johnny Horton**, whose friends had always kidded him about his tendency to drive fast. Known to millions of music fans as “**The Singing Fisherman**” and as the voice behind an incredible string of hit songs that fused country, rockabilly and folk, Horton had just finished playing a sold out show just a couple of hours earlier at the famed Skyline Club in Austin--the very same venue his friend and mentor **Hank Williams** had played his last live performance nearly eight years earlier. Sadly, Williams died of

a heart attack on New Year's Day, 1953 in the back of his chauffeured powder blue Cadillac while traveling to his next performance.

Next to Horton slept **Tillman Franks**, Horton's good friend and since 1955, his devoted manager. Prior to Franks becoming his manager, Horton's career consisted largely of near-misses and stalled attempts. Franks's keen ear for music along with his managerial and promotional savvy had guided Horton to the top of the music charts in only a few short years. And although Franks was still recuperating from a recent hernia operation, he agreed to accompany Horton on the 220 mile drive to Ajax, Louisiana for the hastily arranged duck hunt. He was that kind of friend.

In the back seat sat another close friend and fellow musician **Tommy Tomlinson**, who had just flown into Austin earlier that day after an arduous recording session back in Nashville. Tomlinson was looking forward to the duck hunt; it was a much needed break as well as an increasingly rare opportunity to catch up with the chart topping Horton, whom he had known for a long time and would often play in his band, both on the road and in the studio, whenever he had a break from his own burgeoning career.

On the outskirts of Milano is a bridge that is perched over the tracks of the railroad that runs through town. Horton, who grew up in east Texas, must have driven over this bridge hundreds of times during his many years of gigging in Louisiana and Texas. In fact, it was on this very stretch of highway near Milano, in 1953, that Horton and his backing trio at the time, **The Rowleys**, was driving home from a New Year's Eve gig when the news of Williams's death came over the radio. The legendary Williams was only 29 years old when he left behind his young bride of less than three months, **Billie Jean Jones**, said the news report. Just a few months earlier, Horton had befriended Williams and his new bride when both singers appeared on the same bill on the hugely popular Louisiana Hayride radio program.

Horton stayed in touch with the grieving Billie Jean and soon thereafter they began dating. In September, 1953 Horton married Billie Jean and together they welcomed two daughters into the world, **Yanina**, then **Melody**. Yet despite these personal triumphs and a growing regional audience, Horton's music career continued to stall on the national scene.

However, this all changed beginning in 1956, when Horton released eleven straight Top 40 singles over the next four years, most notably the million-selling *The Battle of New Orleans*, which won the 1960 Grammy Award for Best Country & Western Recording. His other hits included *Honky Tonk Man*; *When It's Springtime in Alaska (It's Forty Below)*; *Johnny Reb*; and *Sink the Bismarck* and many others.

Seemingly, it was if he was traveling the same personal *and* career trajectory of Hank Williams, but without the booze and drugs that led to his late friend's downfall, for Horton was an avowed "tea sipper" as his friends liked to call him and he proudly wore that label as if it was a merit badge pinned to his chest. For Horton, life was good.

Nevertheless, there was one small glitch in Horton's otherwise perfectly hewn world.

Eerily, Horton had been having premonitions of his own early demise for the past few months. He was convinced that he would lose his life to a drunk driver and told this to anyone who would listen. He had cancelled a scheduled appearance at the recent premier of the **John Wayne** movie, *North to Alaska*, whose title track by Horton was currently climbing to the top of the music charts on both sides of the Atlantic; he also tried to get out of the Skyline Club gig, but to no avail. So as not to tempt the tragic fate he had imagined for himself, Horton stayed in his Skyline Club dressing room until it was time for him to perform and he avoided the club's bar area.

Tillman later remarked that Horton would often ask his sister to pray for him while he was on the road, and he made her promise that she would take care of his wife and children if he ever did indeed die of unnatural causes. He would even practice swerving his Cadillac away

from potential trouble at high speeds whenever he found an empty stretch of highway. And Texas was full of empty stretches of highway--except tonight.

As his Cadillac began to cross the bridge Horton could see the headlights of James Davis's west-bound truck. Violently hitting one side of the narrow bridge, and then the other, the truck finally collided head-on into the big Cadillac. Horton never had a chance to put his often practiced defensive driving skills to use as the bridge was too narrow to avoid the drunken Davis.

Tillman Franks suffered numerous head injuries, but survived intact. He would later go on to write an autobiography, as well as continue to promote the musical legacy of his friend Johnny Horton.

Tomlinson's left leg was fractured in many places. He would eventually lose his leg to amputation less than a year later.

Tragically, Horton died in route to the hospital. He was only 35 years old. And just as tragic, Billie Jean became a widow once again. Each of her husbands had sung their last song on the Skyline Club stage before a sold out audience, and each of her husbands drew their last breath in their beloved Caddies.

James Davis walked away from the crash with minor cuts and bruises. According to Franks, Davis would later plead "no contest" to "murder without malice," and then was given a two year suspended sentence. He did not serve any time in prison.

Finally, it was not uncommon during the early- to mid-sixties for school teachers to play Johnny Horton's folk ballads to make history fun and palatable for children--a fitting tribute for a family man such as Horton. But despite the fact that Horton shot to fame largely because of his folk ballads, music historians appreciated his lasting contributions to the rockabilly genre even more. For this, Johnny Horton was posthumously inducted into the Rockabilly Hall of Fame.

To find out more about Johnny Horton and his tragically brief but illustrious recording career, go online and check out the Rockabilly Hall of Fame website; or search youtube.com for videos of some of his televised performances.

(a reader emailed me to clarify the story on James Davis, the drunken driver of the truck that killed Johnny Horton. Davis was a student at Texas A&M and was not a resident of the Milano area, but of Brady.)