

## **An American Original: The Unknown Legend of Mickey Newbury**

By Tim Wilton

**I**n music, there is a fine line that separates fame and anonymity, and never shall the twains meet. However, every now and then the line will blur just enough to allow each side to join together, thus producing a real-life music paradox--*the unknown legend*.

It will be five years ago this month that music's quintessential unknown legend, Houston-born singer/songwriter **Mickey Newbury**, passed away in his sleep after a five year battle with emphysema. He was 62.

Although national recognition eluded Newbury, his music legacy, quite frankly, is phenomenal. Newbury's catalog of songs has been recorded over 1000 times by more than 400 performers from (at last count) fourteen countries. He is the only songwriter to have four top-10 singles on four different charts at the same time. He is referenced in the celebrated Waylon and Willie duet, *Luckenbach, Texas*: "*Between Hank Williams pain songs, Newbury's train songs and 'Blue Eyes Cryin' in the Rain.*" He is responsible for launching the careers of both **Kris Kristofferson** and **Townes Van Zandt**. And a sixth tribute album of his songs has just been released.

Born in Houston on May 19, 1940 to Milton and Mamie Newbury, Milton Sim "Mickey" Newbury, Jr. developed an interest in music and poetry while attending Jefferson Davis High School, where one of his classmates and friends was **Kenny Rogers**.

A talented tenor, Newbury joined a local doo-wop group, **The Embers**, in 1954. In 1957, The Embers signed with Mercury Records and enjoyed some regional success for the next couple of years, opening for the likes of **Sam Cooke** and **Johnny Cash**, as well as other national acts that came through Houston. While with the Embers, Newbury taught himself how to play

guitar and was greatly influenced by Houston's fertile music scene of the '50s--folk, blues, rockabilly, country and jazz.

Newbury remained with The Embers until 1959 when he left to enlist in the U.S. Air Force. After a three-year stint stationed in England, Newbury returned to Houston and earnestly chased his dream of being a singer/songwriter.

Living out of a 1954 Pontiac, Newbury traveled throughout Texas and Louisiana pursuing singing gigs and working on shrimp boats and other odd jobs. This continued well into 1964, when Newbury finally moved to Nashville, where an acquaintance of his had landed him a job as a writer with the prestigious publishing company Acuff-Rose Music. Shortly thereafter, Newbury (who was still living out of his car) became fast friends with fellow Texans and fledgling Nashville songwriters Kris Kristofferson and Townes Van Zandt.

Newbury finally broke through in Nashville in 1966 when musician **Don Gibson** turned his song, *Funny Familiar Forgotten Feelings*, into a top-ten country hit. Later that year, Welsh troubadour **Tom Jones** scored a worldwide hit with the same song. With the money he earned from his first hit song, Newbury plunked down \$8000 on a Cadillac. As the story goes according to his friends, he remarked that if he was going to live out of a car, that it might as well be a comfortable one. Newbury continued writing songs and others continued turning them into hits, including *Sunshine* by **Ray Charles** and *She Even Woke Me Up to Say Goodbye* by **Jerry Lee Lewis**.

The stars finally aligned their selves in 1968 when Newbury became the first and, to this day the only, songwriter to ever have four songs reach the Top 5 on four different national sales charts *at the same time*: **Andy Williams**'s reached number one on the easy listening chart with *Sweet Memories* while **Eddy Arnold** topped the country chart with *Here Comes The Rain Again, Baby*. At the same time, **Solomon Burke**'s version of *Time is a Thief* was number one on the rhythm and blues chart, and in pop-rock, boyhood friend Kenny Rogers and his group, **The New**

**Edition**, reached number five with their psychedelic take of *Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)*.

Newbury signed a recording contract with RCA in 1968 and released his first album, *Harlequin Melodies*. The album barely registered with the buying public and Newbury, dissatisfied with the way the album was produced (it was made up of mostly demos recorded over a period of time), parted ways with the label. It was also during this period that Newbury met **New Christy Minstrel** member **Susan Pack** on a blind date set up by Kenny Rogers. They married a couple of years later and then settled down on a houseboat on Old Hickory Lake near Nashville.

Seeking to free himself from the formulaic constraints of the "Nashville Sound" in order to record his music his way, Newbury was one of the first noted singer/songwriters to break away from Nashville Row. He quickly turned to friend and Nashville engineer **Wayne Moss**, who owned and ran a 4-track studio out of his converted garage called Cinderella Studios. There he recorded his groundbreaking 1969 album, *It Looks Like Rain*, for Mercury Records.

On *It Looks Like Rain*, Newbury's sparse arrangements and heartfelt songs of melancholy and loss were woven together by subtle mood-setting sound effects that included falling rain, wind chimes, and the occasional train whistle being heard far off in the distance. Additionally, his songwriting had progressed to the point that his songs became suites--songs that are coupled by a segue--as evidenced in *Write A Song A Song/Angeline* and *33rd of August/When The Baby In My Lady Gets The Blues*. Later on, Newbury would revisit two of his most enduring songs from *Rain*--*33rd of August* and *San Francisco Mabel Joy*--several times more in subsequent albums. And of course, various performers including **B.B. King**, **Joan Baez**, **Waylon Jennings**, **Buffy St. Marie** and many others kept recording his songs.

Critically hailed, *It Looks Like Rain* was given very little support from Mercury and sold very few copies. Once again, Newbury switched labels, this time to Elektra, in 1970.

With Elektra, Newbury continued making influential albums beginning with 1971's *Frisco Mabel Joy*. From that album Newbury released perhaps his best-known single, *American Trilogy*. A dynamic arrangement of a suite of Civil War-era songs, *Dixie*, *Battle Hymn of the Republic* and the old spiritual *All My Trials*, Newbury's *American Trilogy* reached #23 on the national charts. Elvis Presley loved the song so much that he closed each of his live performances with it--thus it may very well be the last song Elvis ever sung before a live audience. Since 1971, more than 100 artists have recorded *American Trilogy*.

Newbury released his next LP, *Heaven Help the Child*, in 1973. The album's title song, which referenced **F. Scott Fitzgerald** and Paris (very un-Nashvillian), won the "World Popular Song" contest at the Tokyo Music Festival in April 1973. *Live At Montezuma Hall*, an entirely acoustic album, followed later on that same year.

Together, this trilogy of albums became a hallmark for other singer/songwriters who broke away from Nashville, including Kristofferson, Van Zandt, Jennings, **Tom T. Hall**, **Guy Clark** and **Willie Nelson**. Mickey Newbury had become a hero to these "country outlaws." In fact, it was Newbury who convinced **Roger Miller** to record Kristofferson's *Me and Bobby McGee*, and he was also responsible for convincing Van Zandt and Clark to move to Nashville to pursue songwriting careers a few years before.

Despite the outlaw label, Newbury never cashed in on the hugely popular Country Outlaw movement of the early to mid-70s. Instead, he gradually withdrew from public performances. Following the 1973 birth of their first child, Chris, the Newbury's moved to Oregon, where they had three more children.

In 1980, he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. Following his 1981 release, *After All These Years*, Newbury would release only two more albums during the 80s (mostly revisiting his earlier songs while mixing in a few new originals), so that he and his wife could concentrate on raising their growing family.

Following 1991's *Best of Mickey Newbury*, Newbury started writing and performing again. Between 1994's live *Nights When I Am Sane*, and his very last offering in 2003, the posthumous *Blue To This Day*, Newbury released eight albums, all while battling the ravages of emphysema. His last live performance was at the Kerrville Folk Festival in 1998. Sadly, Newbury died in his sleep in Springfield, Oregon on September 29, 2002.

Mickey Newbury was, and still is, popular music's archetypal unknown legend. Save for a small but devoted almost cult-like following of fans, Newbury's name is hardly recognizable to even the most learned music fan today. However, his legacy continues to grow each year as more and more performers around the world record and re-record his songs.

For more information on Mickey Newbury, be sure to visit the website his family still maintains, [www.mickeynewbury.com](http://www.mickeynewbury.com). For a more in-depth review of Newbury's recordings, visit the back issues section of [www.nodepression.net](http://www.nodepression.net), an excellent site for aficionados of all music genres, but especially the blues.