

Mac Davis: West Texas Song Painter

By Tim Wilton

I was having a hard time getting to sleep the other night, so I decided to see what was on the tube, naturally. Not interested in watching the same half-hour loop of news repeat itself all night, or the endless cacophony of infomercials, I flipped over to a movie channel and *voila!* A Jackie Gleason movie was in progress. I'd like to report that it was a good movie, but if you have ever seen **The Sting II**, then you'd know I was being too generous, maybe even an outright liar. And you've probably already figured out that I was asleep pretty soon after I started watching—yes, it was that bad. Some sequels should never take place.

But it did make me pause and wonder about whatever happened to Gleason's co-star, Mac Davis. It felt like it was just yesterday that the Lubbock-born Davis was a bona fide triple threat in the world of entertainment—chart topping singer and songwriter, laid back host of his very own TV variety series, promising movie star—only to seemingly disappear from the spotlight some time ago.

But after doing some digging around online, I was glad to find that Mac Davis was indeed still alive and doing well, albeit below the radar nowadays. His back story though, is an interesting one.

Born Scott Davis on January 21, 1942 in Lubbock, he was raised primarily by his divorced father—his mother moved to Atlanta when he was very young—in a strict, religious household. But Davis was a typical west Texas kid of that time, growing up on a steady diet of football, rodeo, fistfights, and country music. But that all changed in 1955.

When Davis was just thirteen years old, he saw Elvis Presley perform rock and roll music at the county fairgrounds in Lubbock and heard *That's Alright Mama* for the first time; soon

afterward the inspired Davis took up the guitar, became a fixture in various rock and roll bands around Lubbock, and started writing songs. In fact, Davis was just fourteen when he wrote what would become a number one country song for him more than twenty five years later, *Hooked on Music*. (At about the same time, in a non-descript garage somewhere else in Lubbock, a little-known musician named Buddy Holly was about to change the face of American popular music, but you already know the rest of that story.)

An ambitious kid, Davis graduated from high school when he was sixteen, moved to Atlanta to be closer to his mother, and continued playing the music of Presley and Holly, as well as some of his own material, in a series of bands around town for the next few years.

In 1962, Davis was hired on as the southeast regional manager for the Chicago-based label Vee-Jay Records, home of numerous R&B greats including Gene Chandler and Dee Clark. Three years later, Davis left Vee-Jay Records to become the Atlanta-based regional manager for Liberty Records, which was headquartered in Los Angeles. Yet despite the day-to-day hassles that were typical with his job, Davis continued writing and composing songs in his spare time.

Apparently, success in the record business—at least on the administrative side—came naturally to Davis. In less than two years at Liberty, Davis was promoted to lead the label's publishing arm, Metric Music, and then moved to Los Angeles in 1967. Immediately, Davis shopped Metric's catalog of songs (including his own) to producers around LA and eventually caught the attention of quite a few established recording artists, including ultra smooth vocalist Lou Rawls, who became the first singer to chart a Mac Davis composition, *You're Good For Me*, in the closing months of 1967.

Davis's songwriting career quickly heated up in 1968 after a chance meeting with a music scout who was scoring Elvis Presley's latest movie at the time. Davis gave the scout a song he originally wrote for Aretha Franklin, the catchy *A Little Less Conversation*, and although the song did not chart very high initially (it would become a huge posthumous hit for Presley

many years later, and can now be heard in numerous commercials, movies and television series, most notably during the opening credits of **Las Vegas**), the King liked Davis's songwriting style so much that he requested more songs from him. In turn, Presley's career enjoyed a renaissance period thanks to Davis's deft hand at songwriting.

The first Davis single to chart for Presley was the top-40 hit *Memories*. This was followed by the heart-breaking lament *In the Ghetto*, which hovered at the top of the sales charts for a good portion of 1969 and was a track on Elvis's landmark comeback album, *Elvis in Memphis*. The trifecta was completed when Presley landed *Don't Cry Daddy* in the top ten later on that year. And then in 1970, Presley tabbed Davis to be the music arranger for his first television special.

Also that year, Davis signed his own recording contract with Columbia Records, who released his debut LP, **Song Painter**—the album's title was inspired by Glen Campbell, who called Davis a “song painter”—later that same year. His first single, *Whoever Finds This, I Love You*, enjoyed only moderate chart success, but Davis had firmly established a solid reputation for songwriting, especially for other artists.

Over the next couple of years, Davis-penned compositions became big sellers for the likes of Glen Campbell, who climbed the country and pop charts with *Everything a Man Could Want*; Kenny Rogers & The First Edition had a hit with *Something's Burning*; and adult-contemporary heart-throb Bobby Goldsboro reached number one in 1971 with *Watching Scotty Grow*. And then a year later, soft rockers Gallery scored a long ride on the sales charts with Davis's signature song, *I Believe in Music*.

Davis finally hit the big time on his own with the title track from his third LP, 1972's **Baby Don't Get Hooked on Me**. The song stayed at the top of the pop charts for a few weeks and then crossed over to the country charts for a successful run into the top 20. For the rest of the decade, Davis continued experiencing cross over chart success with hits such as *One Hell of*

a Woman and *Stop and Smell the Roses*, both from his 1974 LP, **Stop and Smell the Roses**; *Burnin' Thing* and *Rock 'n Roll (I Gave You the Best Years of My Life)* in 1975; and *Forever Lovers* in 1976. He was also named the Academy of Country Music's Entertainer of the Year in 1974.

To capitalize on his cross over appeal, NBC gave Davis his own variety series in June, 1974, simply called **The Mac Davis Show**. Regular features on his show were Davis's singing of his own songs, light comedy bits, reminiscing about his growing-up years in Texas and informal chats with the audience. In fact, he was often seen seated with the audience during part of the show, answering questions or singing and playing his guitar. He would also improvise songs from title suggestions submitted to him by the audience.

NBC shelved the show after only a few months due to low ratings. In early 1975, NBC and Davis had another go at it, basically keeping the same format as before. Again, after only a couple months of not attracting a sufficient audience, the show was shelved. NBC must have seen something in Davis's show that most of America didn't, and once again resurrected it in the spring of 1976. Finally, after only a month of the same low ratings as the first two tries, NBC cancelled **The Mac Davis** for good. Still, Davis would go on and host numerous TV specials during the rest of the seventies.

In 1979, Davis made his feature film debut in the excellent football film, **North Dallas Forty**, opposite Nick Nolte. His turn in front of the camera was so impressive that *Screen World* magazine named Davis one of twelve "Promising New Actors of 1979." However, Davis never really lived up to his promise after starring in two largely forgettable films, **Cheap to Keep Her** in 1980 and the aforementioned **Sting II** in 1983.

And after releasing ten albums for Columbia Records, including his **Greatest Hits** LP in 1979, Davis left to sign with Casablanca Records in 1980. During the seventies, Casablanca was the premier label for disco music, then abruptly changed course and went into country music.

Davis had an immediate hit for Casablanca with his 1980 smash, *It's Hard To Be Humble*. He followed this with another top-10 country single at the end of that same year, *Let's Keep It That Way*.

Davis had a couple more top-10 country hits for Casablanca in 1982 with the biographical songs *Texas In My Rear View Mirror* and *Hooked on Music*. Finally, Davis's last foray into the top ten was his 1985 release, *I Never Made Love (Till I Made It With You)* from his album of the same name for Mercury Records.

By the end of the eighties, Davis had basically fallen out of the public eye as he struggled with alcohol dependence, for which he sought treatment. However, his songwriting skills were still as sharp as ever in the hit song he wrote for Dolly Parton in 1990, *White Limozeen*. His last album of note, **Will Write Songs for Food**, was a mix of old and new songs and was released in 1994.

Since then, Davis has appeared on Broadway, taking the lead role in the very successful *Will Rogers' Follies* in the early 90s, and has made numerous television appearances over the years, including voicing a couple of recurring characters on TV's **King of the Hill**. Rumor has it that Davis will appear with fellow Lubbock native and actor Barry Corbin in the Toby Keith film, **Beer for My Horses**, set to be released sometime this year.

Although Davis isn't a fixture on the music charts anymore, his songwriting is still respected throughout the music industry. He was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2000 and the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2006. Davis is also a member of the West Texas Music Hall of Fame.

If you would like to find out more about Davis, there is an excellent interview with him on www.elvis.com where he goes into detail about the few years he spent with The King. Other than that, there are bits and pieces regarding Mac Davis spread out all over the internet, so be sure and put your detective cap on when you search.