

VOICES IN THE HALL
DAVE COBB EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today's guest, producer extraordinaire Dave Cobb.

DAVE COBB When we approach these records we approach it much the way a record would've been done in 1965, 1970. And it's humans playing together. There are mistakes all over the record. There's timing issues, there's tuning issues, there's pitch issues, there's flubs of words. The same way people are seeking out organically grown food, I think people are seeking out organically grown music at the same time.

The moment I heard Chris Stapleton I was like, "Man I've got to track him down." If I can just get to Nashville I'd run into him and I'd run into Jason Isbell and try to sucker them in to make records.

I like to fly by the seat of my pants. Walk in and see what's going to grab you that day.

To me it was a really cool thing about linking really great artists that I like now, and linking Nashville, what Nashville is today. Taking kind of a snapshot of it. And I love it when I get to introduce somebody to somebody else I think is talented. And you see their eyes both sparkle. And I love the unity in the scene. That's why I moved here.

PETER COOPER It's Voices in the Hall, with Dave Cobb.

"4th of July" - Shooter Jennings (Black Magick / Universal South)

PETER COOPER "Fourth of July," from Shooter Jennings. Produced by Dave Cobb. Dave has produced grand albums by Brandi Clark, Jason Isbell, Chris Stapleton, Sturgill Simpson, and many others. He's one of American Roots Music's prime forces for good. Dave, welcome to Voices in the Hall.

DAVE COBB Thanks, man.

PETER COOPER It's good to have you here.

DAVE COBB Pretty wild to be in this historical place itself, looking out and seeing all the exhibits and...

PETER COOPER Yeah, I've seen you come through here.

DAVE COBB I abuse this place bad. I'm sorry.

PETER COOPER I remember you and Sturgill Simpson were walking through here prior to recording an album. Do you draw inspiration from this place?

DAVE COBB Yeah, I think we have tons of lessons to learn from everybody who came before us. I just saw that Keith Whitley exhibit when I walked in there. That sparked something, walking

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into the studio today. Everytime I come in here, it's like a textbook. You see what these people have done in their lives, and their writing, and you just get inspired to continue the tradition as much as you can.

PETER COOPER It's a reminder of a story that continues to be written, and you're one of the people that are adding chapters to it. And we've paid attention of what you're doing here at the museum and had items up on display from you and your work, so it's a...

DAVE COBB It's bizarre.

PETER COOPER You're part of this.

DAVE COBB Who would have thunk.

PETER COOPER Now, we often talk about, "Well, So--and--so produced such--and--such", but I think a lot of people don't really understand what it is that a producer does. Some producers may not understand what it is...

DAVE COBB Yeah, sometimes I don't. Sometimes it's just ordering lunch at the right place, you know?

PETER COOPER What is a producer? What does it mean to have produced a record?

DAVE COBB I think a producer is like a film director. For instance, in a film, you have a writer, and the writer brings a script to a director to execute the final vision, to pick the actors, to pick the locations, to oversee each segment of the film. I think that's what a music producer does with music. You have the artists come in with a song. Sometimes, they don't have the song, you help him with that, which is maybe a little extra. Sometimes you assemble the players for the session. Sometimes you just police the players in the band. And you oversee to make sure it's being recorded properly, or add to it. Or sometimes, you get involved with adjusting all the levels. Sometimes it's a babysitter role. Sometimes it's a partner role. Sometimes it's, like I said, ordering the right place for lunch. It's really beyond definition in a lot of ways. I make it up as I go too.

PETER COOPER It can make a dramatic difference. I think about Bill Monroe's version of "Blue Moon of Kentucky"... versus Elvis Presley's version of "Blue Moon of Kentucky."

DAVE COBB Right.

PETER COOPER Same song, completely different. So you're taking some material, assuming the song's already there, you're taking what's there, and you're the person, essentially, in charge of deciding how it's going to sound, what it's going to be when it hits people's ears.

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DAVE COBB Well I like deciding that with the artist. I like for the artists to have their own sound and retain that, but just you know be the voice of reason, be the guy who encourages or pushes them just a little bit further, who gets them to that point of excitement on record. Sometimes it's good to have a sparring partner. Sometimes you act like that in the studio, somebody that really challenges them and they come out with it. Or play them something they never heard to get some inspiration to steer a song a certain way.

When I was here, you had that Sam Phillips exhibit opening, and his son, Jerry, was talking about Sam Phillips walking in the Sun Studio, the producer at Sun Studio, and he said he walked in every day with no plan and came out with these historical songs from Jerry Lee Lewis to Carl Perkins to Elvis to whatever it was. I didn't know that I was copying him until that day. But I'm the same way. I like to fly by the seat of my pants, walk in, and just see what's gonna grab you that day, and almost... You pull things from nowhere. I don't know where they come from, but it's the same way for the artists. I like for them to walk in with one idea and come out with another sometimes.

PETER COOPER Is it more pressure on you when you are hit with a, what you perceive to be a great song? Or is it less pressure? I know you've talked about Jason Isbell's song, "Elephant." Upon hearing that, and just going, "Holy cow."

DAVE COBB Yeah. Goosebumps.

PETER COOPER Or a song like "24 Frames" by Jason, it's the same way. When you get hit with something that makes you think, "Well, this is not ordinary," does that make your job easier?

DAVE COBB That makes it way easier, 'cause then all I have to do is capture at that point. My job is not to mess it up. I've always told people, I deal with record labels quite a bit, and they know not to call me for a hit song. I tell people like, "Don't call me if you want a hit record. I don't want any part of it. I don't know how to make a hit record." I just worry about what the song speaks, and how to represent that, and not to worry about any of the rest of the stuff, really.

"24 Frames" - Jason Isbell (Something More Than Free / Southeastern)

PETER COOPER Jason Isbell, with "24 Frames," again produced by Dave Cobb here on Voices in the Hall. We've been pleased to display Jason's handwritten lyrics to that song at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. And when you see his cross-outs, his deletions and his additions, his editing process, it's a real window into the mind of one of our time's greatest songwriters.

I'm Peter Cooper, here with the marvelous and generally amiable producer Dave Cobb. Dave has had a ton of success — I'm talking about commercial success and creative success — with

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the great singer Chris Stapleton, who has an incredible voice. I asked Dave how he found out about Chris.

PETER COOPER You actually pursued Chris?

DAVE COBB I did. I heard him when I was still living in California. A band I work with, a rock band, called Rival Sons, the singer for that band is one of the best singers in the world. He is just a monster singer. And he was bragging how he found this record from this group called SteelDrivers, and I should listen to the singer. So, he pulled out his iPhone and he played me "You Put the Hurt on Me," I think, SteelDrivers. And the moment I heard that guy's voice coming out of a phone, I was like, "Man, I gotta track him down." At that time, I was already starting to slowly focus on moving to Nashville, and I felt like if I just get to Nashville, I'd run into him and I'd run into Jason Isbell and try to sucker them in to make records. And so that was definitely very targeted.

And I actually ran into Chris when I first got to town. I ran into him in a guitar shop, right next to him, and I said, "Hey, you Chris Stapleton?" He was like, "Yeah." I was like, "Cool man. See you later." I didn't really know how to talk to him. Because I was so enamored with his voice. And then I got a call from his manager, I guess about a year and half ago, two years ago, saying he wanted to meet with me 'cause he'd heard the Sturgill Simpson record, *Metamodern*, and he wanted to get together and give it a try. Man, that was like the best phone call ever. And nerve-wracking too 'cause I didn't want to mess it up. And thank god, we got to go make a record after that.

PETER COOPER You were on stage at the CMA Awards with Chris Stapleton when his life changed and, really, the life of country music changed. He went in seven or eight minutes on television in late 2015 from being a respected but little-known artist, with no radio hits to his name in his voice, to being the single most popular artist in the world of any genre...

DAVE COBB Crazy.

PETER COOPER In that time...

DAVE COBB Mind--blowing.

PETER COOPER It's a moment the likes of which have never really happened on an award show like the CMA Awards, that I can think of, but that performance changed everything for him. Could you feel that in the moment? What was that evening like?

DAVE COBB It's weird. I think going into that performance, we were just happy to be there. We couldn't believe we got invited to something like that, yet alone play something like that. So there were no expectations that night for anything to happen. It was just, "This should be fun, we'll get to play this in the show and that'll be that." It felt fun on stage but I didn't realize the impact that it was gonna have, I really didn't. But I remember looking out at the audience,

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looking out at the other country artists in the front couple rows, and they were so full of joy for Chris. You could see it on their faces, they were genuinely happy for him to have exposure, if that makes any sense. They looked at him and they were just... I felt like Chris did a lot of good deeds for a lot of people for a lot of years, and that night you could feel everybody wanting to support him. That's what I gathered from that night. I don't think I even slept. I remember the moment he got off stage and won his first couple of awards, he calls kids. He's like, "You guys doing okay? Just checking on you" and, "Make sure you're in bed."

None of it seemed like it was... At the time, he was doing the thing he would have done everyday as a father, just check on his kids. And I don't know, he always has this beautifully simple way about things that I think is so smart. I know when he played the ACM Awards, the moment he got done with his song, he hugged his wife and started folding up his own guitar cable. And I just think, none of that's really changed him as a person. I think he's still a solid, amazing human being, and good family man.

"TENNESSEE WHISKEY" - CHRIS STAPLETON (TRAVELLER / MERCURY)

PETER COOPER "Tennessee Whiskey," from Chris Stapleton. Produced by today's Voice in the Hall, Dave Cobb.

Dave, when a producer makes musical choices that sound contemporary, they'll be cutting-edge now, but ten years from now they'll sound very ten years ago. If a producer makes musical choices that are more timeless, they may not sound contemporary now, but they won't sound as dated later. Like in the 1980s they used this instrument called the Yamaha DX-7 keyboard...which if you hear one of those now you expect some 80s pop star to come along. You can't use that on a modern record.

DAVE COBB I'm copying the records that inspired me sonically. When I listen to *Nashville Skyline*, those mixes are crazy and I love that about them. I love the feel, and it's just floaty and takes you somewhere. And I'm copying early Waylon record like, *Ol' Waylon* or something. I love the way those records sound. Their kick drum is really loud and whacked out, and the bass is super-cranked. I think it's taking elements of all that stuff and just borrowing from it. And I think it becomes a sound, but it's a culmination of lots of records I like. My preferred records are old records. I'm chasing those sounds, but somehow they come out, with the technology now, they still come out sounding just normal, or maybe pertinent. I don't know, maybe not.

PETER COOPER I think they are pertinent. When you're talking about Waylon Jennings records and Bob Dylan records, they inform everything that we do today. Did you grow up a rock and roll kid? You grew up in Georgia.

DAVE COBB Definitely, definitely. I grew up Pentecostal, so we always had hymnals in church, and I was stuck there, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday morning, Sunday night, vacation Bible study, Christian school. So I had all that stuff around me, so I wanted to rebel against it. I think I got into Black Sabbath, and AC/DC, and Led Zeppelin, and the Rolling

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Stones. And I went that way for quite a while, until, really, I moved to California when I was 27, from Georgia. And when I got out there I met Shooter Jennings, and Shooter Jennings played me this record, *White Mansions*. And that was my first introduction, really, into country I didn't know about. We weren't... My parents didn't have Jerry records or Waylon Jennings records. We had *Andy Griffith Sings Elvis Presley* or something. We had everything but the good records, or what I consider my favorite country records. So I didn't know about that. So I learned about that much later in life. And then after that it was off to the races, learning and digging everything I could, about all these similar country artists I didn't know about growing up.

PETER COOPER *White Mansions* was a concept album. It was conceived by Paul Kennerley.

DAVE COBB Correct.

PETER COOPER A guy from Great Britain who was fascinated with...

DAVE COBB Southern culture. Yeah.

PETER COOPER Southern culture. And that had Waylon Jennings on it.

DAVE COBB Jessi Colter.

PETER COOPER Jessi Colter. It's not an album that a lot of people look to as a touchstone, necessarily, not out of qualitative reasons, but it's just one of those things that came and went, except it came back to you.

DAVE COBB Well, as soon as I heard it, it's the landscapes on those records. Lyrically I think it's really potent. And I remember just getting goosebumps and tearing up a little bit when I heard it. But also the music on it, just the symphonic overtones to it with country music fascinated me. There's such a landscape. There's such a feel to that record. And I think it was the combination of the English musicians and the southern musicians that made it interesting or different. So it caught my ear, and then obviously, I chased everything down that came from that, or at least Paul Kennerley's inspirations that he got to. So you know I steal half my tricks from one record, really.

"White Trash" - Steve Cash (White Mansions / Mercury)

PETER COOPER From the *White Mansions* album, produced by Paul Kennerley, we just heard "White Trash," sung by Steve Cash with Eric Clapton on guitar. I'm Peter Cooper, and this is Voices in the Hall. Let's get back to my interview with producer, Dave Cobb. We're talking about that album, *White Mansions*, and Paul Kennerley...

PETER COOPER In 2016, Atlantic Records released *Southern Family*, which was very much in the Paul Kennerley tradition, and Kennerley supported it.

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DAVE COBB He was involved, yeah.

PETER COOPER The man who had done the *White Mansions* album that was so inspirational to you. Your name is not on the cover?

DAVE COBB Yeah. I'm not the artist.

PETER COOPER You're not the artist, but you conceived of this thing. What did you want to make when you set out to make that?

DAVE COBB Well, I kind of had the idea a little while ago. A friend said, "You should make a concept record." And I thought it sounded like a terrible idea and then it hit me the concept of the Southern family. I thought everybody has a great story about it. And I told the guys at Atlantic, I was like, "You know, I have this idea for a concept record," and I thought they would laugh me out of the office. And I told them the basic concept of people writing songs about growing up, songs about children, and mothers, and brothers, and grandparents, and just these really honest songs that people maybe not necessarily put on their album. It's for no other purpose but for art. And it was probably, literally, a 30--second conversation like, "Yeah, go do it." And I was like, "Well, let me tell you about it. It's got family and it's a concept record." And they're like, "No, go do it." And I was like, "Okay. Well, first of all." I was trying... They were sold. And I thought, "Man, I can't believe I just got away with that." I thought them to go like, "Yeah, cool, kid. Let us know how it comes out." And they got involved.

And then I asked Jason Isbell about doing it and he was like, "Absolutely, I'm in." And I asked the Stapletons about it and like, "Yeah, we're in." And it just felt like one of those things that, at that point, it changed from being a concept to being a reality. And I think everybody is excited about being on the same record together. 'Cause all these people were friends anyway, and some of them weren't, but now they are. So to me it was a really cool thing about linking the really great artists that I like now and really great songwriters, and linking Nashville, what Nashville is right now, taking a snapshot of it. It's kind of like a yearbook.

And it turned from something that's out of the blue into reality, and then it just got better and better. We got to work with people I never worked with before like John Paul White of the Civil Wars, performer of the Civil Wars. I was a big fan of his voice and his writing, so we went to Muscle Shoals, and knocked on his door and suckered him into doing it, and he was all about it. And Miranda Lambert came in on it, people I didn't know like that. So, it was... And Brandy Clark, I didn't know her before. She came in and just did a beautiful job, incredible voice. I think everybody was excited about being together on the same album.

PETER COOPER That togetherness is evident on that album and it reminds me of the scene in the 1970s you had at Glaser Sound Studios, which got to be called Hillbilly Central was where Waylon recorded and Tompall Glaser was there, Willie was in and out. Lots of songwriters, Jessi Colter, and lots of songwriters in there at all hours of the day and night. And there was the feeling of people trying to do something together. Where later, I think that became fragmented and sometimes people felt like they were in competition with one another. *Southern Family* and

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really, the kind of scene you've set up over at RCA Studio A, it seems to be a welcoming approach and a, "Hey, let's everybody come in here and interact." Are you conscious of that?

DAVE COBB Definitely, definitely. I'm really thankful to have really talented friends. And I love it when I get to introduce somebody to somebody else I think is talented, and you see their eyes sparkle, and they help each other out. It's really amazing. Right now, I have a young guy, Anderson East, signed to my imprint with Elektra and he's on tour with Chris Stapleton right now. And he actually sequenced *Traveller*. I invited him, when we got done with Chris Stapleton *Traveller*, I told Morgane, Chris's wife and him, I said, "I got this friend. He's really good. It'd be great to bring somebody who's never heard the record to sequence the album." And they trusted me. They blindly trusted me. Anderson came over and he listened to the record and they became fast friends. Anderson pulled out a guitar that day and Chris Stapleton, one of the best singers in the world, heard Anderson sing and they were cool with each other after that. So he sequenced the record, now he's on tour. It was cool to see Jamie Johnson give Sturgill Simpson opening dates early on. And Isbell gave Anderson some dates. And it's cool to see Chris Stapleton and Isbell play together. I love that, I think that's so cool. I think all these people have very similar interests, and I love the unity in the scene. That's why I moved here.

PETER COOPER Dave, thanks so much for being here.

DAVE COBB I appreciate it, man.

PETER COOPER And it's great to talk to you about this stuff, and it's great what you've done for us, given us an improved soundtrack for the past few years.

DAVE COBB Well, man, I appreciate everything you do personally, and everything Country Music Hall of Fame does. So, anything and everything for Country Music Hall of Fame.

"Simple Song" - John Paul White (Southern Family / Elektra)

PETER COOPER John Paul White, "Simple Song." Produced by Dave Cobb for the *Southern Family* album. There's more of my interview with Dave Cobb over on our website, VoicesInTheHall.org and on our social channels, @VoicesintheHall. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to learn about upcoming episodes. Country music is alive and well and vibrant and useful. And this podcast is produced by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum with Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo for BMP Audio, and it's recorded by Grammy winning audio czar Alan Stoker. I'm Peter Cooper, thanks for listening. Come see us at the Museum in beautiful downtown Nashville.